



Centers of Progress, Part 8: Rome (Roads)

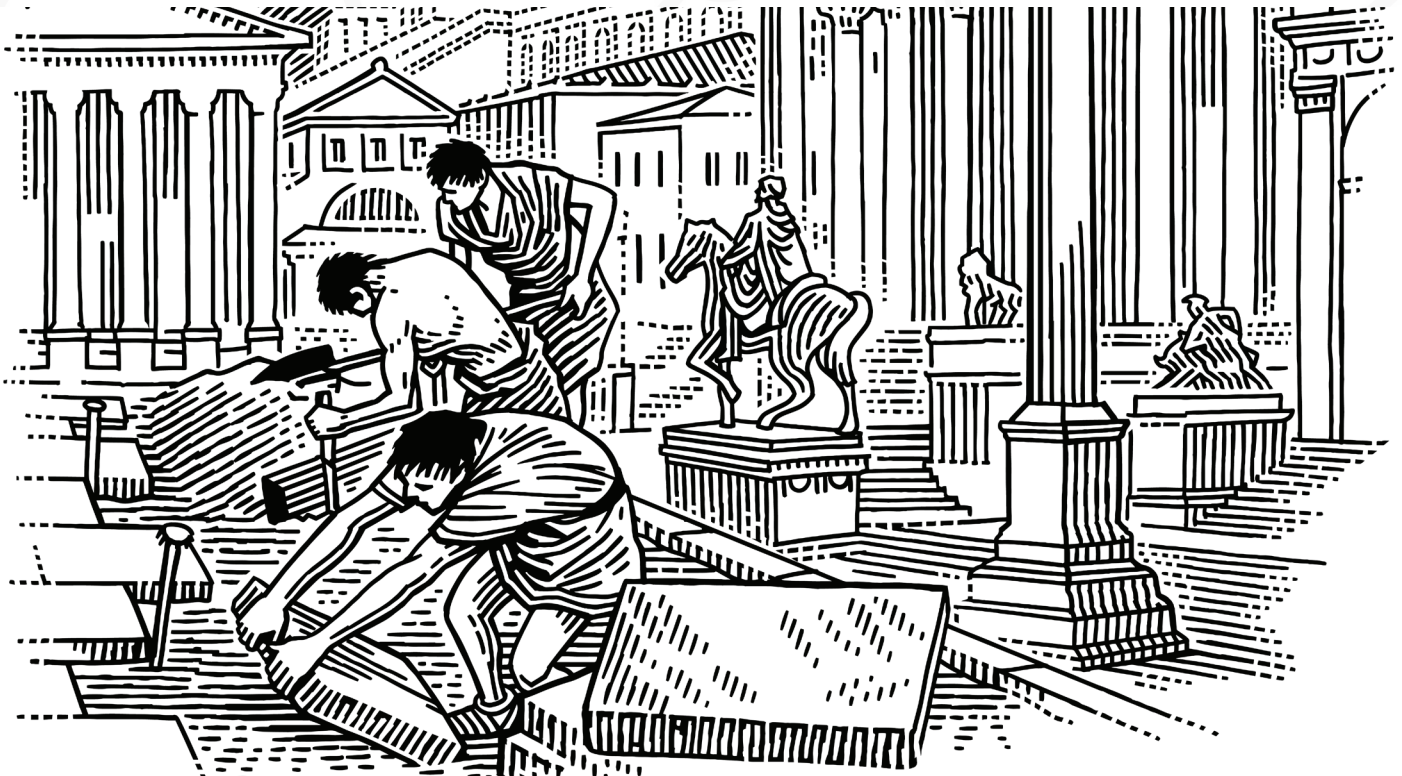
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Overview

Featured article: “Centers of Progress, Pt. 9: Rome (Roads)” by **Chelsea Follett**.

In this article, Chelsea Follett writes about the extraordinary legacy of Roman infrastructure and how clean water, public venues, working sewers, and paved roads improved the lives of millions, as quoted here:

There are still Roman baths in use in Algeria, two millennia after being constructed, and a Roman amphitheater in France, the Arena of Nîmes, still holds live concerts today. In Rome itself, a section of the *Cloaca Maxima* (the “Greatest Sewer”), dating to the Augustan period, is still in use. But it was Roman roads that arguably left the greatest mark of all. To this day, many of the roads survive, and some of their alignments are still in use—with modern roads overlaying the original routes.



This lesson invites you to examine Roman engineering feats, including roads, bridges, aqueducts, sewers, and concrete, and how this infrastructure enabled state-building, economic prosperity, and cultural exchange that still affect our lives today.

Warm-Up

ALL ROADS LEAD TO ROME



The *Via Appia Antica* (the Appian Way), shown here, is one of the oldest and most important roads leading to Rome. It was originally laid out in 312 BCE.

Look closely at the photo and answer the following questions with a partner. Be ready to share your answers and thoughts with the class.

- What do you notice about the road surface that the people are walking on? What building materials were used? How is it different from most modern roads?
- The road is perfectly straight. Why do you think the Romans tried to build their roads as straight as possible, even over rugged terrain?
- Why do you think the road has lasted more than 2,300 years? What might that tell us about Roman engineering?
- What different purposes might this road have served in ancient times? What kinds of people may have used this road?

Questions for Reading, Writing, and Discussion

Read the article and then answer the following questions:

- According to the article, what made Roman engineering superior to that of earlier civilizations?
- How did Roman infrastructure, such as roads, aqueducts, and sewers, contribute to both military power and daily life?
- What role did concrete play in Rome's ability to build long-lasting structures, including roads?
- How did engineering help unify the Roman Empire politically and economically?
- Look at this photo of a Roman road. With your new knowledge of Roman roads, summarize in a few sentences how it was built.



- Describe Rome's political structure during the Republican era. Hint: Despite the name "Republic," it was not a democracy.
- What was the Pax Romana?
- What were the Romans communicating by placing the *Milliarium Aureum* or Golden Milestone in the Roman Forum?
- Do you think the article overstates or understates the importance of Roman engineering to the empire's longevity? In other words, was anything else—for example, Roman law, military structure, or cultural values—more critical to Rome's success?
- What does it say about technology that advanced engineering could not prevent the eventual fall of the Roman Empire?

Extension Activities/Homework

EATING OUT IN ANCIENT ROME

The ancient Romans had a lot in common with modern Americans, including their love of roadside fast food. If you visit the ruins of any Roman city, you will likely see many examples of *thermopolia*, a type of Roman quick-service restaurant (singular *thermopolium*). These snack bars were open to the street and offered take-out meals.

In this activity, you'll explore what eating out was like in an ancient Roman city or rest stop, analyze an authentic thermopolium menu, and compare it to modern fast-food experiences.

STEP 1: DISCOVER THE THERMOPOLIUM

Examine the photos of Roman thermopolia and answer the accompanying questions.

Thermopolium 1



This photo shows a thermopolium of Regio V (an excavation area) in Pompeii. A thermopolium was an ancient Roman street food stall. Counters had built-in pots (called *dolia*), which held soups, stews, or wine. The frescoes show two ducks ready for roasting and a chicken. Another painting (not in this photo) shows a dog on a leash, which may have deterred thieves. Watch a tourist's clip of this thermopolium [here](#).

Thermopolium 2



This thermopolium was owned by Lucius Vetutius Placidus. Many Romans did not cook at home. Fast food was common, including roasted meat (pork, duck, or chicken), bread and olives, lentil stew, salted fish, snails, and wine. Frescoes adorned the walls. The eruption of Mount Vesuvius covered Pompeii in volcanic ash in 79 CE, and many of its buildings, including its thermopolia, were preserved.

STEP 2: COMPARE ANCIENT AND MODERN FAST FOOD

Compare the thermopolium concept to a modern fast-food place of your choice (McDonald's, a favorite food truck, a local ramen stall). Research thermopolia, including their menus. Use reputable sources. Complete the following chart.

Category	Thermopolium	Modern Fast Food	Both
Menu offerings			
Location and setup			
Who ate there?			
Atmosphere			
Food preservation			

STEP 3: REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Answer the following questions in your own words.

- How do thermopolia reflect the economic and social structures of ancient Roman cities? Who relied on them, and why?
- Compare the role of thermopolia in Roman society with the role of fast food in the modern world. What do these institutions reveal about time, labor, and class?
- How might the development of the Roman road network have influenced the spread and success of thermopolia across the empire?
- How might road access have affected the food supply, recipes, and customer base of thermopolia?

COMPARING CONTROVERSIAL RULERS IN HISTORY

Many historians, both ancient and modern, have considered Augustus Caesar the greatest statesman in history. He is noted for his political genius, effective reforms, and the long-lasting stability he brought to Rome. Yet he was also ruthless, manipulative, and autocratic.

In this activity, you will focus on this prompt:

Compare the leadership of Augustus Caesar with that of another autocratic ruler. To what extent did each leader use power to create stability, and at what cost to individual freedom and political tradition? Support your argument with historical evidence.

TASK 1: BRAINSTORM

Here is a working definition of a tyrant:

A tyrant is a ruler who exercises absolute power, often cruelly or oppressively, without following the rule of law.

With this definition in mind, brainstorm these questions:

- What specific characteristics and behaviors define a tyrant?
- How does a tyrant differ from a monarch, an emperor, or an authoritarian?
- Can a ruler be both popular and oppressive?

TASK 2: RESEARCH AUGUSTUS CAESAR

Form small groups (2–4 students). Use credible sources to respond to the following questions.

How did Augustus Caesar do the following?

- Gain and maintain power
- Employ propaganda (e.g., statues, coins)
- Suppress opposition (e.g., censorship)
- Use public works to gain support

Also research how he is remembered today and by whom.

TASK 3: COMPARE AUTOCRATS

Your teacher will assign your group one controversial leader to compare with Augustus.

Here are some possible leaders to be assigned.

Qin Shi Huang	Charlemagne	Aurangzeb
Henry VIII	Louis XIV	Tokugawa Ieyasu
Napoleon Bonaparte	Porfirio Díaz	Joseph Stalin
Benito Mussolini	Francisco Franco	Kim Jong-un
Augusto Pinochet	Idi Amin	Saddam Hussein

Focus on the following questions about your assigned autocrat. Be sure to give specific historical evidence to support your answers.

- How did the leader rise to power?
- How did the leader establish legitimacy? Did this person improve stability and oppress dissent?
- What methods of control or propaganda did this person use?
- How is this person remembered today, and by whom?

Complete this chart to compare Augustus with your assigned autocrat.

Category	Augustus Caesar	Your autocrat: _____	Both
Rise to power			
Legitimacy established in what ways?			
Use of propaganda			

Treatment of enemies			
Long-term legacy			

TASK 4: MAKE AN ARGUMENT

With your group, create a Google Slides or PowerPoint presentation focusing on the same prompt:

Compare the leadership of Augustus Caesar with that of another autocratic ruler. To what extent did each leader use power to create stability, and at what cost to individual freedom and political tradition? Support your argument with historical evidence.

To structure the presentation, work together to complete one task on each slide:

Slide 1: Provide the name and basic biographical information of your assigned autocrat.

Slide 2: Analyze how Augustus and your leader gained and maintained power.

Slide 3: Explain how each justified their rule (e.g., propaganda, ideology, religion).

Slide 4: Assess the short- and long-term effects of their rule on their society.

Slide 5: Consider how much stability came at the expense of liberty or justice.

Slide 6: Using the working definition of a tyrant in Task 1, was your assigned autocrat a tyrant?

Present your slideshow to the class. All group members must participate.

UNCOVERING A ROMAN MONUMENT

In the article, Follett writes, “The city of Rome grew and prospered. As a visitor, you would have been mesmerized by the imposing architecture of its massive buildings and bustling crowds of diverse people moving through its streets.” Roman construction, including its road network with bridges and viaducts, has inspired architects for over two millennia. Many of the world’s most famous edifices are based on Roman models.

In this activity, you will research a significant Roman monument to understand its historical, cultural, political, and architectural importance and creatively present your findings.

STEP 1: RECEIVE YOUR MONUMENT

Your teacher will assign you and a partner one of the following:

The Colosseum	The Pantheon	Circus Maximus
Arch of Constantine	The Roman Forum	Trajan's Column
Appian Way	Baths of Caracalla	Basilica of Maxentius
Alcántara Bridge	Segovia Aqueduct	Arena of Nimes
Maison Carrée	Pont du Gard	Hadrian's Wall

STEP 2: EXAMINE THE EDIFICE

With your partner, answer the following research questions:

- What is the structure called, and where is it located? What is the significance of that place?
- Who commissioned or built it? What was their purpose?
- When was it constructed? What historical events surrounded its construction?
- What materials and engineering techniques were used?
- How did the monument reflect Roman culture (religion, ideology, institutions)?
- How has it survived? Is it still in use today?
- What's one fun fact—a surprising or lesser-known aspect—about this structure?

Try to use at least one primary source from the monument itself, such as an inscription, in your research.

STEP 3: CREATE YOUR PRODUCT

Work with your partner and choose one of the following formats, or come up with your own, to present your research:

- Tourist brochure for visitors
- Mini museum exhibit with labeled artifact images
- 3D model (physical or digital)
- Podcast or video explanation (3–5 minutes)
- Mock interview with the archaeological director of the structure

Individually, answer the following reflection questions in one paragraph each.

- In what ways does your monument reflect the values, social structure, and ideologies of Roman society? Consider aspects such as who built it, who used it, and how it was meant to be perceived.
- How do modern states use architecture to shape public memory, legitimize power, and promote an ideology, similar to how Roman monuments functioned? Provide one contemporary example.