

*Law, Latin, Literacy and the
Liberal Arts
To Chapter 9 Notes and References*

When Aristotle died, in 322 BC, he left a considerable personal library. To aid his studies, he had amassed so many titles that, to quote Strabo, the geographer, ‘He was the first to have put together a collection of books and to have taught the kings in Egypt how to arrange a library.’¹ Later, through ‘the vagaries of inheritance’, the library had come into the hands of a family living in Pergamum, ‘who had kept it stored underground to save it from being confiscated by the king.’² They sold the books to Apellicon, a bibliophile who took them to Athens. Then, in 86 BC, the Roman dictator Sulla invaded Attica, sacked Athens and, when Apellicon died a short time later, seized his books and shipped them back to Rome. Sulla knew what he was doing: the library included titles by Aristotle and Theophrastus, his successor, that could be found nowhere else. The books were in terrible condition – worm-eaten and sodden from damp – but they could be read and were copied, and saved.³

The Roman reverence for the Greek way of life, of its thought and its artistic achievements, was one of the dominant ideas throughout the long era of its empire. When we speak now of ‘the classics’, we mean – as often as not – Greek and Roman literature. But it was the Romans who invented the very notion of the classics, the idea that the best that had been thought and written in the past was worth preserving and profiting from. In saying that, however, the real difference between Rome and Greece in the realm of ideas is obscured. Whereas the Greeks took an almost playful interest in ideas for their own sake, and explored the relationship between man and the gods, the Romans were much more interested in the relationships between man and man and in *utilitas*, the usefulness of ideas, the *power* that they could bring to affairs. As Matthew Arnold put it, ‘The power of the Latin classic is in character, that of the Greek is in beauty.’⁴ There are many Roman authors whom we now revere as classics in themselves: Apuleius in the novel; Catullus, Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Martial, Juvenal in poetry; Terence, Seneca and Plautus in the drama; Cicero, Sallust, Pliny and Tacitus in history. Each of these offered something over and above their Greek counterpart. But, enjoyable and instructive as these authors are, they do not comprise the major intellectual innovations of the Roman world. So far as *our* everyday lives are concerned, the two most important Roman ideas were republicanism, or representative democracy, and law. Direct democracy, as we have seen, was a Greek invention but – one has to admit – it has scarcely any modern imitators. Representative

democracy, however, was incorporated into the constitutions of the various republics which began to appear from the eighteenth century onwards, and now extends from Argentina to Russia to the United States of America. In ancient Rome, as is broadly true in America today, policy was agreed by the Senate, and implemented by magistrates with *imperium*, a particularly Roman notion.⁵ The ancient kings, and then the aristocracy, and then the magistrates, were all invested with *imperium*, 'a key concept, which designated the acknowledged right to give orders to those of lower status and expect them to be obeyed . . . This power was at all times ill-defined, wide-ranging and arbitrary. From the start a vital way in which this *imperium* could be expressed was in imposing by war the holder's authority and that of Rome on neighbouring communities who were thought to have challenged it.' Conquest was an integral part of Roman ideas about themselves.⁶

The Roman system had come into being in 510/509 BC, when the king had been expelled, to be replaced by elected officers. The key features of the consulship or magistracy, which replaced kings, were these: tenure was limited to one year; there were two magistrates with equal *imperium* – 'never again would a single individual be invested with supreme power'; there was accountability – the magistrate could be called to account for his actions at the end of the year.⁷ Continual conquest, with recurring crises, meant that this system was modified on occasions, as revealed by Tacitus and Suetonius. In crisis a single *dictator* was appointed, reminiscent of the tyrant in the Greek world, and at other times, when there were simultaneous military actions in several places, more than one magistrate was allowed, some with military functions, others with civil administrative duties. In this way the administrative machinery of the republic took on its familiar form, of a body of magistrates, advised by a Senate (group of *senes*, or old men).⁸

Originally, the kings of Rome had been given *imperium* by the gods when the city itself was founded. Thus the kings had been granted the responsibility of getting things done on behalf of the people. As a result *imperium* was a quality that 'belonged' to the person who exercised the power and it was, therefore, accepted that he could use it at his own discretion. At the same time, *imperium* also stood for the power of Rome itself, or at least of her people. *Imperium* was the muscle by which the *res publica* got things done.⁹ It was less an abstract notion of power, more a propensity to issue orders (from the Latin word *imperare*, 'to order'). Long after the kings had been disposed of, magistrates still consulted the gods (*auspicium*) about future courses of action. On his first day in office, a magistrate would rise early and pray to the gods, to ascertain whether he had divine approval for the exercise of his *imperium*. Despite the fact that there are no known cases of the gods refusing such approval, the ritual was always deemed necessary.¹⁰

As time passed, magistrates became divided into those with *imperium* and those without. Dictators and consuls had *imperium* and so did praetors, a new class of magistracy, created in 366 BC to relieve consuls of the task of hearing legal cases. Magistrates without *imperium* comprised the quaestors, in effect investigators in legal and financial matters, the tribunes of the plebeians, whose job it was to administer the plebeian council, and the aediles, who had responsibility for the fabric of the city, the upkeep of roads, walls, aqueducts etc. Finally, there were the censors, 'whose function had more to do with what we mean by census than what we mean by censor'. Among their duties was identifying those who had contravened the morality of the state (and who therefore could not hold public office).

Like all other magistrates they were entitled to wear a special toga and also held the *auspicia*, an elevated status which entitled them to consult the gods.¹¹

The Roman form of representative democracy was quite complex. It had to be because, by the time of Augustus, the first emperor (63 BC–AD 14), there were one million inhabitants in Rome alone and the empire stretched almost 5,000 kilometres from west to east (the Atlantic to the Caspian Sea) and nearly 3,000 kilometres from north to south (England to the Sahara). Not even a man like Augustus, who had a passion for efficiency, could administer such an empire all by himself.

In practice there were four political bodies apart from the magistrates. The *comitia centuriata* began life as an assembly to represent the interests of the army but over time it comprised the whole population and was made up of 193 centuriae, with people being allocated to centuriae by the censors according to the amount of property they had. There were five classes: the top *classis* had seventy centuriae and at the bottom there was one centuria not even registered as a *classis* which represented those who had no property to register. Such unfortunates were known as the *proletarii* on account of the fact that they were outside the active (useful) agricultural system and could only produce children (*proles*).¹² In the case of the *comitia tributa* and the *concilium plebis* the voting unit was the tribe. In the beginning there had been just four tribes, all in Rome itself, but in time that number grew to thirty-five until, in 241 BC, it was stabilised. In these bodies, the wealthy did not enjoy the same in-built advantage that they had in the *comitia centuriata*. The essential point here was constitutional balance: the *comitia centuriata* was dominated by the landed aristocracy, the *concilium plebis* was an assembly of the *plebs* alone, and the *comitia tributa* was an assembly of the whole people. The assemblies were powerful, up to a point, but in practice still depended on the magistrates, who had control over business discussed and election timetables.¹³

The other important body was the Senate. Originally, the consuls chose a new Senate every year. Once the censors had acquired this responsibility (in the fourth century BC), however, senators were appointed for life, and this simple but all-important fact made the Senate the most continuous element in the structure of the state. Added to this, its members were all ex-magistrates – experienced, well-connected, no longer ambitious for office. This constitution gave the Senate immense prestige.¹⁴ Strictly speaking, the Senate's role was solely advisory: 500 senators were present in Rome at any one time, the rest on duty in the provinces. The Senate could be convened only by the senior magistrate, and such meetings would begin with the consul presenting to the assembled company the matter on which he required advice. The senators would then respond, in a specified order. First came the consuls-designate for the following year, if the election had been made, second those who had already been consuls, and so on. As time ran out (the senate could not meet after dark) more junior senators expressed their opinion by crossing the floor of the assembly and sitting near those speakers with whom they agreed. They were called *pediarii*, 'foot soldiers', because they voted with their feet. At the end of the session, the consul took the mood of the meeting and if there were no dissent he would issue a *senatus consultum*, a decree of official 'considered opinion'.¹⁵ If there were any doubt, there would be a vote. Although in theory the Senate's decision was merely 'advice', in practice it was difficult for the consul to ignore a *senatus consultum*. Consuls held office for a year only and afterwards

normally joined the Senate. Few consuls risked crossing colleagues with whom they would have to spend the rest of their working lives. The Senate also saw new legislation before the other assemblies, which meant above all that it had control over the strength of the army, which in effect governed foreign policy.¹⁶ And since ‘empire’ was central to Rome’s idea of itself, this too added immeasurably to the prestige of the Senate.

A case can be made for saying that Roman law is the most influential aspect of Roman thought.¹⁷ The Greeks never developed a written body of law or a theory of jurisprudence and so what the Romans created is their own achievement. Roman law is the basis for much of the law used in the West today and is still part of some university law courses. According to historians of the French *Annales* school, the fact that so many countries in Europe shared a common legal heritage is partly responsible for the rise of Europe from the twelfth century onwards.

Roman law was first formalised in the Twelve Tables, introduced in 451–450 BC. Like the Ten Commandments, the Twelve Tables set out basic legal procedures and punishments, and this became an important part of education: in Cicero’s youth schoolboys still learned the tables by heart. By the late Republic, criminal courts as we would recognise them had been established, in which *iudices* were appointed to hear cases in a set formula. This formula allowed for two new professions. First, there were those who spoke on behalf of clients – advocates. In Rome, this was an activity that any ‘gentleman’ might perform: his rhetorical education was supposed to prepare him for just such an undertaking. Advocates were supposed to work for the good of the community (*pro bono*) and both Cicero and Pliny were advocates in this manner. At the same time a profession of legal specialists emerged – the first lawyers. This had hitherto been the prerogative of the College of Priests, the *pontifices*, but, as Rome expanded and life became more complex (and because many disputes had nothing to do with religion), specialism became necessary. These jurists, as they were called, wrote legal opinions (including rebuttals) to add to and counter Senate decisions or imperial edicts. To begin with, leading jurists would take one or two ‘pupils’: later these developed into the first law schools.¹⁸

There is one work of Roman law which survives almost intact: this is the *Institutes*, by the jurist Gaius. Written around AD 150, it served for a long while as a textbook of Roman law.¹⁹ Besides specific laws (*leges*), it records senatorial decrees, the decisions of emperors, and the consensus of legal specialists, showing how the body of law grew. This body of law applied to all Roman citizens in the empire.

At the root of Roman law was the distinction between different statuses. This is quite different from modern law where wealth, sex or nationality are treated as irrelevant by the courts. Roman law distinguished slave from free and allowed for different degrees of freedom: those subject to someone else (master, father or husband) and those legally independent but still subject to wardship (children and women). This made for complications: an outrage (*iniuria*) committed against a married woman meant that there might be three victims – the woman herself, her father if he were still alive, and her husband. The higher their status the greater the crime.²⁰

The most visible aspect of status and *dignitas* was shown by the legal power of the father, *patria potestas*. The Roman father had absolute power – the power of life and death – over

his entire family: this is what *paterfamilias* meant. It was an absolute power over his legitimate children, including adult children, over his slaves and his wife if married in a form which transferred paternal control (*manus*) to the husband (see below). As has been often observed, the *familia* could be seen as 'a state within a state'. A father's authority was absolute and jealously guarded. In exceptional crimes sons and wives were transferred from the custody of the state to paternal authority.²¹

In Rome, so long as one's father were alive, no one could act as fully independent, in particular in financial matters and in contract law. An adult son could own property only by means of a *peculium*, a sort of trust guaranteed by his father, but revocable at any point. While his father was alive a son could not make a will or inherit property in his own right. That son might be a magistrate, even consul, but if his father were alive he was still under his *patria potestas*. At the same time, the demographics of Rome mitigated this picture. Nearly one-third of children lost their fathers by the time they were ten and, by twenty-five, when people normally got married, more than two-thirds were independent. By forty-one (the minimum age for a consulship) just 6 per cent had fathers who were still alive. A father could 'emancipate' his son, which originally meant releasing him from *manus*, but this does not seem to have been common.

No less important or complex was the legal relationship between husband and wife. Romans made much of the fact that husbands should keep their wives under strictest control, but in practice this depended on which form of marriage the couple had concluded. There were three forms of union. Two made use of ancient ceremonials. In one, the couple offered a cake made of emmer wheat in a joint sacrifice held in front of ten witnesses. In the other ceremony, a father 'sold' his daughter to her husband before five witnesses. In both cases, this had the effect of transferring a woman from the control of her father to that of her husband. Her property became his and she fell under his *manus*.²²

Quite what women got out of these arrangements is hard to say, so it is important to add that there was an alternative. There was a third way by which a marriage could come into being and this was, as the Romans, in their inimitable style, called it, 'by usage'. If a man and wife lived together for a year, it was enough: she passed into her husband's control.²³ By the same token, if the couple spent three nights apart in any one year, this 'usage' lapsed. In practice, then, people could get married and divorced without much fuss, or their partner's consent. These customs had an effect on Romans' ideas about love, and about joint marital property, an idea that, essentially, didn't exist. If the couple had been married before witnesses, then the husband owned everything. If the marriage resulted from usage then a wife's property remained hers and, in the case of divorce, left with her.²⁴ It is therefore perhaps not surprising that divorce and remarriage were common in Rome.

The importance of law to the well-being of the Roman state was shown by the fact that decisions could be invalidated if the proper procedures were not followed. Not even an emperor's decisions could ignore the status of litigants involved in legal battle. In this way, as Pliny remarked, the law was now superior to the emperor rather than the other way round. This was a crucial advance in the development of civil society.

We may say that Roman law culminated in the code of Justinian (AD 527–565), which in turn largely shaped European law as it exists today, both in Europe itself and in many

of those countries colonised by later European powers. This code consists of the following entities: the Institutes, elementary principles; the Digest, a collection of juristic writings; the Code, a collection of imperial Enactments and the Novels, Justinian's own legislative innovations. The layout of Justinian's work identified the evolution of ideas and names those responsible, so it is especially useful in showing the way legal thought developed and matured in Rome. Its most well-known and influential element is the *Corpus iuris civilis*, effectively statute law affecting civil administration and the reach of ecclesiastical power and privilege. During the Middle Ages, the code of Justinian was more influential in the eastern part of the empire (Byzantium) but it was one of those classical elements that was rediscovered in western Europe in the twelfth century.

Law, as we have seen, was an important part of the education of schoolboys in Cicero's day. Education in Rome, the whole paraphernalia of learning, was much more organised there than it had ever been before anywhere else. There were schools in Babylon and academies in ancient Greece, and libraries with scholars in Alexandria and Pergamum. In Rome, however, besides a more widespread system of schools, with a standardised curriculum, there were far more public libraries – twenty-nine that we know about – a thriving book trade, the first publishing businesses that we have records of, many new developments in literary criticism, an art trade where art exhibitions were common, interior decoration (mosaics in particular), larger theatres – built with the help of concrete, from the ground up, in the centre of cities – and a new literary form, satire. The life of the mind, the world of ideas, was more widespread, and more organised, than ever before.

A standard or 'core' curriculum was taught to all the sons of the elite, who wanted their boys to enter government. This core, this shared element, probably accounts for the spread of Roman culture in the West.²⁵ The first thing the boys were taught, between the ages of seven and eleven, was Latin. For the better part of two thousand years, Latin occupied a particular place in the history of the West. The success of the Roman empire meant that Latin became the one tongue spread over a wide area. It was then adapted by the early Christian church, with the result that it subsequently became the *lingua franca*, first of ecclesiastical matters, then of diplomacy and learning. At the same time, since ancient Greece and Rome were thought of as the origin of all that was civilised about the West, familiarity with the language came to be seen as the mark of a civilised individual. Latin, it was said, 'taught mental agility, it taught a proper aesthetic sense, and the hard work involved taught generations of boys the value of "grind" and showed them how to develop their powers of concentration'.²⁶ 'Latinity', the culture of Latin, was held to represent 'order, clarity, neatness, precision and succinctness, whereas the "vernacular" languages were disordered, incoherent, unsophisticated and coarse'.²⁷ Latin *was* important, if not quite in this way. As we shall see, in later chapters, it played a very important role, in the Church, in scholarly life, and in the emergence of modern Europe. Before all that, however, we need to consider its position in Rome.

Chapter 2, above, covered the state of the world's languages at the point where the peoples of the New World separated from those of the Old. The birth of Latin conveniently helps to update the story. The true historical importance of Latin has only been understood since 1786, when an English judge, serving in India, made an extraordinary intellectual

breakthrough. Sir William Jones had trained as an Oriental scholar before reading law (meaning, in those days, that he was taught Latin). When he got to Calcutta, in 1785, he started to study Sanskrit, the language in which the scriptures of India had been composed. After months of research and reflection, he gave a talk to the Asiatic Society of Bengal and the idea he broached there may be seen as the starting point for the whole study of historical linguistics. Jones' breakthrough was to see that Sanskrit, both in the roots of the verbs and in the forms of grammar, was very similar to both Greek and Latin. They were so similar, he said, that they must have sprung from a common source. The judge's argument was so convincing that, since his time, thousands of studies have been made of languages – both living and dead – right across the Eurasian continent. The broad conclusion of these studies is that there was indeed once a 'mother tongue', referred to as Indo-European, which was originally spoken by the people who invented farming and that, as farming spread, the language radiated with it, providing a common linguistic base for all, or most, languages right across the Eurasian landmass.²⁸ This is discussed in more detail in Chapters 2 and 29.

The Italic languages (Latin, Oscan, Umbrian) are so similar to the Celtic (Irish, Gaelic, Welsh, Cornish, Breton) that some scholars feel that speakers of a common Italo-Celtic group must have appeared somewhere on the central Danube no earlier than 1800 BC. Then, for some reason, the Italic-speaking group moved south, first into the Balkans, and then around or across the Adriatic into Italy. Meanwhile, the Celtic-speaking group migrated west into Gaul (France), from where they spread into Spain, northern Italy and the British Isles. As compared to Greek, Latin grammar and syntax are more archaic, closer to the original Indo-European. This is seen particularly in the process of inflection. Inflectional languages reveal the relation among words by adding endings to a stem. In addition, Latin also reveals relationship by adding prefixes.²⁹

The Indo-European-Italic-speaking newcomers seem to have reached Italy in three waves during the second millennium BC. The first to arrive were the speakers of proto-Latin, who soon after were forced west by later arrivals: their language survived only in the lower Tiber valley, spoken by the Latini tribe, and as other dialects spoken around Falerii and in Sicily. The second wave settled in central Italy, in the mountains, and their dialect became Umbrian in north central Italy, and Oscan further south, named after the Osci, a tribe near Naples (the Romans called them Samnites and their principal tribe was the Sabines).³⁰ Finally, between 1000 and 700 BC, the Adriatic coast of Italy was overrun a third time, by immigrants whose tongue included Venetic in the north.

The first evidence for written Latin has been found, according to Mason Hammond, on the protecting catch of a gold safety pin or *fibula*, dated by some scholars to 600 BC. The inscription is written in Greek letters reading from right to left, the opposite of later usage. Converted into Roman letters it reads: *Manios med fhesheked Numasioi*. In later Latin this would be *Manius me fecit Numasio* = 'Manius made me for Numasius'.³¹ There are very few inscriptions from before the third century BC, which makes one think that the Romans wrote very little, or did so on perishable substances. At the same time, the language spread piecemeal, to the Oscan area by 200 BC, and to Apulia, in the far south, by the first century BC.³² Yet there were many areas of Italy where Oscan was spoken long after Latin was common in Spain. We do hear of documents in Latin as early as the treaty made by the

Roman consul Spurius Cassius with the Latini tribe in 493 BC, and the Twelve Tables already referred to (451–450 BC). But literacy must have been limited at this stage; otherwise more inscriptions would surely have survived.

The earliest literary survivals, in general, preserve the pattern and rhythms of oral speech. That is to say, they are repetitive, whether rhyming or rhythmical. This obviously makes sense: it was easier to remember stories if those narratives were rhythmical and rhyming.³³ Verse, as we call it, comes from a noun in Latin, *uersus*, literally, ‘a turning’, from the verb *uerto*, ‘I turn’. It was a term originally applied to a furrow, because the plough both turned up the soil and turned back and forth in ploughing a field. From there the word was used for a line of plants laid out in a furrow and eventually it was used for any line, including a line of poetry. In English, verse and poetry mean the same thing, but verse, properly, applies only to the *form*, whereas poetry, from a Greek verb meaning ‘I make’, covers both form and content.³⁴ We nowadays contrast both verse and poetry with ‘prose’. This word derives from *prosa*, a corruption of the Latin adjective *prorsus*, ‘straightforward, right on’. *Prosa oratio* was ‘speech that goes straight on, didn’t turn, like verse did.

The vocabulary of Latin was poorer than that of Greek, and many words had been imported from elsewhere (for example, Latin borrowed twice as many words from Greek as did Greek from languages further east).³⁵ Some of the deficiencies were pretty basic – Greek, for example, had far more words for colours than did Latin.³⁶ In addition, compared to Latin Greek had an extra voice, number, mood and tense and twice as many particles.³⁷ On the other hand, the Romans had more words to do with family matters, distinguishing for instance between maternal and paternal relatives. And since the favourite food in Rome was pork we find they had many more words for swine than anyone else. There were many legal and military metaphors, but large parts of the empire were still agricultural and this influenced the language. The English word ‘delirious’, for example, comes from *delirare*, which literally means ‘to go out of the furrow’, and then to act like a madman.³⁸ By the same token, ‘calamity’ was originally *calamitas*, a plague, destructive to crops. The Romans themselves did not feel that Latin had the grace of Greek. They thought it was more suited to rhetoric than to lyricism, and to some extent this reflected their view that virility and dignity were the personal qualities that counted most. In Latin, ‘There is hardly any trace of affectation or literary refinement,’ says Oscar Weise, in his *Language and Character of the Roman People*. Latin on the lips of Romans was a disciplined language, with many subordinate clauses dependent on a single governing verb, ‘which might be seen as a military arrangement of words, with all regimented clauses looking to the verb, as soldiers look to their commanding officer.’ Latin was a concrete, specific language, avoiding abstractions. Classical Latin, says Joseph Farrell, was a masculine language. ‘We know of many more women writing in Greek than in Latin.’³⁹

Many English words, of course, come from Latin and their etymology helps illustrate Roman ideas. For example, the *tribuni* were originally headsmen of the tribes; they came to be magistrates whose job was to protect the people; the raised seat which they used, by virtue of their high office, was called a *tribunale* – hence our word ‘tribunal’. *Candidatus* was the word used to describe an applicant for a magisterial post, but its origin lay in the bright white toga (*candida*) which was worn when soliciting votes.⁴⁰ Our word ‘culminate’,

comes from *culmen*, reed, with which roofs were made, completing a building. ‘Contemplate’ and ‘temple’ are related: *contemplari* originally meant to watch the heavens. To begin with, a consecrated building was a *fanum* and hence all unconsecrated ground which lay before the shrine was *pro fanum*.⁴¹ Despite its shortcomings as a poetic language in comparison with Greek, Latin was an interlocking, internally logical system, which has made it the subject of great fascination down the ages.

The high point of classical Latin, the so-called ‘golden age’ (there was a ‘silver age’ too), fell at the time of Augustus, with the prose of Cicero and the verse of Virgil. After that, its trajectory or career was far from straightforward, until it became a dead language. After the end of the western Roman empire in the fifth century AD the speech of ordinary people in Europe changed and diversified into the various ‘Romance vernaculars’. But Latin became an international language. As both a spoken and a written tongue, it was used for learning, diplomacy and in the church, certainly as late as the seventeenth century, and in some corners of Europe even later.⁴² At the same time, the literary language – on the lips of writers trained in rhetoric – grew distant from the ordinary spoken Latin. In spite of Cicero’s elegance, and Virgil’s graceful fluency, a vulgar Latin was in common use among the masses. When Pompeii, a city south of Naples, was overwhelmed by an eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79, its everyday life was ‘frozen’ at a specific moment in time. Modern excavation has revealed, among other things, certain scribblings on its walls, called in Italian *graffiti*, ‘writings’. These preserve the ordinary, everyday Latin of the common people in mid-first century AD. Many of these are ribald curses invoked against their author’s enemies, in language a long way from Cicero and Virgil.⁴³

Latin also took over in the church. Christianity had originally grown among Greek speakers in the eastern Mediterranean (the first bishops of Rome were all Greek speakers).⁴⁴ The first Christian missionaries and the authors of the New Testament (the Gospels and Epistles) had used the current Greek of the Hellenistic world, known as ‘common’ (*koine*) Greek. In Rome, however, the early Christians naturally spoke and wrote the Latin of the ordinary people who were the first converts. Moreover, they avoided the Ciceronian literary style because that was identified with upper-class paganism. But that changed. As the Roman empire declined and fell, and the church took over some of its functions (which are described in the next chapter), Christianity adopted Latin – and the finer elements of Ciceronian and Virgilian Latin at that. This is most clearly seen in the *Confessions* of St Augustine, in which, just before AD 400, he set out, in an intimate, confessional tone, the course of his conversion to Christianity.⁴⁵ Arguably even more important for the influence of Latin on the Western church was the translation of the Bible (*Biblia*), prepared by St Jerome over the years from about AD 380 to 404.⁴⁶ This, the Vulgate Bible, incorporated many classical traditions – satire, biography – to produce a standard work that endured for centuries.⁴⁷

Returning now to the education of the young Roman, the next stage, from twelve to fifteen, was the study of language and literature. The main text studied here was Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Students read aloud from this and other works and developed their skills of criticism, commenting on grammar, figures of speech, and the writer’s use of mythology. At sixteen, boys moved from literature to rhetoric, which they studied by attending public lectures.

‘Rhetoric,’ says Simon Price, ‘generally has a bad name today. We value “sincerity” over “artifice” and our modern preference poses real problems for our appreciation both of Latin and Renaissance literature. As C. S. Lewis also wrote: “Rhetoric is the greatest barrier between us and our ancestors . . . Nearly all our older poetry was written and read by men to whom the distinction between poetry and rhetoric, in its modern form, would have been meaningless.”⁴⁸ Study of rhetoric fell into two: *suasoriae* and *controversiae*. *Suasoriae* were designed to help boys construct arguments. They argued over episodes from the past: for example, should Caesar accept the kingship? In *controversiae*, the boys were given difficult legal problems. For instance, in one case mentioned by Price a son falls out with his father and is banished from home. While in exile, he studies medicine. At a later date, his father falls ill and when his own doctors fail to cure him the son is summoned. The son prescribes a special medicine, which the father drinks, then dies. Calmly, the son takes his own medicine but does not die. Still, he is charged with parricide. In class, the students must provide a case for both prosecution and defence.⁴⁹

The system seems to have worked, in that privileges for teachers became common in Rome, though Michael Grant argues that the authorities should have intervened more to maintain standards. Vespasian, emperor in AD 69–79, founded two salaried chairs for the teaching of Greek and Latin rhetoric. Even outside Rome, teachers were exempt from various civic obligations.⁵⁰

The spread of literacy in Rome was piecemeal but all-important. The existence of graffiti, and the fact that more or less average soldiers were able to write letters home, suggests that literacy extended well beyond senators and politicians.⁵¹ But we must be careful not to exaggerate – there were no eyeglasses in ancient Rome, no printed advertisements, no timetables, no mass circulation of the Bible.⁵² One estimate is that not more than 5 per cent of the population in classical Athens was literate in the sense that we use the word today, and not more than 10 per cent in Augustan Rome.⁵³ In any case, to begin with, literacy may not have been seen as conferring the advantages that seem so obvious to us. Many people in antiquity developed prodigious memories and could faultlessly recall great chunks of material. Others were content to listen to their recitations, and respect for memory was deeply entrenched.⁵⁴ In effect, then, people could be ‘literate’ (in the sense of ‘knowing books’) in a ‘second-hand’ way.⁵⁵

Arguments against the wider spread of literacy include the economic. In classical Rome, a scroll was made from sheets of papyrus, glued together. It was difficult to handle; and a long scroll made writing, with quill and ink, more difficult still, as the manuscript lengthened. Copies were produced, however, Cicero being just one who sent volumes to his friend Atticus, who had slaves standing by to make duplicates. Horace refers to the brothers Sosii, inferring that their bookselling/publishing business was profitable, and both Quintilian and Martial mention Tryphon and Arectus as publishers.⁵⁶ Yet this seems doubtful. According to one estimate, a sheet of papyrus in the first century AD cost \$30–35 (at 1989 prices) in Egypt, where it was produced, and much more abroad. Martial’s first book of epigrams – some seven hundred lines long – was priced at 20 *sestertii* (= 5 *denarii*), and his thirteenth (276 lines) at 4 *sestertii* (= 1 *denarius*). To give some idea of value, Martial himself says that ‘you could get a chick-pea dinner *and* a woman for an *as*

each'. Since an *as* was worth $\frac{1}{18}$ of a *denarius*, then as John Barsby puts it, 'You could have had forty-five chick-pea dinners plus forty-five nights of love for the price of a copy of Martial's book of epigrams. It is a wonder he sold any copies at all.'⁵⁷

Most writing, of course, was not epigrams or philosophy. It was functional, relating to the running of a farm or business, keeping accounts, sending letters and so on. This is what William Harris calls 'craftsmen's literacy'. In the *Satyricon*, the freedman Echion, referring to the ability to read legal matters, remarks: *Habet haec res panem* – 'This thing has bread in it.'⁵⁸ As time went by, written contracts gained status and in some cities the filing of contracts became compulsory – to the point where a document withheld from the archive was deemed to be invalid. There was also a growth in use of a new form of document for the borrowing of money – the *chirographum*, one written in the borrower's own hand.⁵⁹ Above all, the late republican Roman needed to inscribe a few letters in order to exercise his voting rights.⁶⁰

Another measure of literacy comes from the extent of public and private libraries. There were no public libraries that we know about in ancient Athens but Pseudo-Plutarch, in his *Lives of the Ten Orators*, says that Lycurgus (c. 390–324 BC) proposed that official copies of plays performed at leading festivals should be stored in the public record office. Libraries may thus have begun in such a way.⁶¹ The first public library in Rome that we hear about was that put together by Asinius Pollio in 39 BC (Caesar had commissioned one earlier but it had never been built). By the fall of Rome there were twenty-nine public libraries in that city alone.⁶² Others that we know about existed at Comum (Como), paid for by Pliny, at Ephesus, Pergamum, and Ulpia.⁶³ The elite, of course, had their own private libraries – Cicero's letters make frequent references to books as he seeks to borrow titles from his friends. From time to time he would drop in on Lucullus' library, on one occasion finding Cato already there.⁶⁴ In 1752, excavations at Herculaneum revealed a private library of 1,800 book rolls.⁶⁵ Finally, in considering the extent of literacy, we may note the wide range of backgrounds of Roman authors. Terence was an ex-slave from Africa; Cato was a member of the ruling aristocracy, while Horace was a freedman's son from Venusia in south-east Italy. Statius, the poet, was the son of a schoolmaster. Still other clues may be gleaned from the fact that the army became heavily bureaucratized,⁶⁶ at least one book in Rome was produced in an edition of 1,000 copies,⁶⁷ and even graffiti refer to the works of Virgil.⁶⁸ (As the most famous writer in Rome, who never had a political or military position, he naturally appealed to the graffiti artists.) Probably, tens of thousands of people could read in Rome, where there was, for the first time, such a thing as a literate culture.⁶⁹ At the same time, oral culture continued for most people. In the market place, people still read out poems and spoke epics from memory.⁷⁰

Writers were more or less free to say what they wanted. The Twelve Tables outlawed defamation and Augustus, who took little notice of lampoons directed against him personally, nevertheless made it a criminal offence to sign them. But there was social pressure instead. The Senate in particular was close-knit and Simon Price tells us that when Ovid was exiled to the Black Sea for writing about the sexual habits of the emperor's granddaughter, he felt 'hard done by' because others, higher up the social ladder, got away with pretty much the same offence.⁷¹ In the main, writing was an urban activity and 'urbane' values were fashionable in Rome.⁷² At the same time, Romans looked upon

themselves as an *active* people, fighting, administrating, *doing*. This takes us back to *utilitas*, the doctrine of usefulness, for ever contrasted in the Roman mind with *uoluptas*, pleasure. And so reading was a useful activity only if it led to writing, ‘and especially if the writings proved to be *morally* useful’.

On this score, poetry was a problem. Everyone conceded that much of it was very beautiful – especially the earlier Greek poetry. But, at the same time, whole swathes were undeniably frivolous. Horace was forced to argue both ways: ‘Poets either want to be of use or give pleasure, or to say things which are both pleasing and useful for life at the same time . . . The poet who has mixed the useful (*utile*) with the pleasurable (*dulce*) wins every vote, by delighting and advising the reader at one and the same moment.’⁷³ Yet the Romans also believed, as the Greeks had before them, that poets were special in some way, attaching to them the term *uates*, which meant ‘prophet’.

As was mentioned earlier, it was the Romans who invented the idea of ‘the classics’, the notion that the best of what had been thought, said and written in earlier ages (especially in ancient Greece) was worth preserving. This idea was intimately bound up with the birth of scholarship, which was such a feature of Roman life.

Our words ‘scholar’ and ‘scholarship’ actually come from the medieval practice of writing commentary and critical remarks in the margins of texts – these comments were known as *scholia*. But the practice itself, the activity of criticism and commentary, began at the great library in Alexandria and it began because of certain characteristics of early books – the scrolls. These were made from thin strips of papyrus, from the fibrous pith of a reed that grew everywhere in the Nile delta. Two layers, at right angles to each other, were pressed together to form sheets, and the sheets glued together to form rolls, the first piece of which was called a ‘protocol’ and the last the ‘eschatacol’. The average sheet could support a column of writing some eight to ten inches high, and was between twenty-five and forty-five lines deep. At times of shortage, when the Egyptian government embargoed the export of papyrus in an attempt to control the production of books, animal skins were used, in particular in Pergamum. The English word ‘parchment’ comes from Pergamum, as is seen in the Italian equivalent of the word, *pergamena*.⁷⁴ For the most part, papyrus was written on one side only. This was partly because scribes preferred to write only *with* the grain of the page and partly because, in a scroll, anything written on the *verso* side would quickly have worn away. The reader would unroll the scroll gradually, using one hand to hold the top roll, which he had already read. This had the effect of making the roll reversed after a reading, so that it had to be rerolled before another reader could use it. With some scrolls being ten metres long, this was a serious inconvenience, and the repeated rerolling shortened the life of scrolls. The inconvenience meant, too, that when one author decided to quote another, the chances were that he would rely on his memory rather than bother to unroll the relevant scroll. The copying of texts was therefore much more difficult than it sounds and it was not made easier by the fact that punctuation was rudimentary, even non-existent. For example, texts were written without word-division (this did not become systematised until the Middle Ages), changes of speaker were not always clearly indicated in dramatic texts (a horizontal line was used – like a dash – at the beginning of a line, but over the years it ran the risk of being rubbed out), and the names of characters

might be omitted altogether.⁷⁵ It was the inaccuracies and confusion created by this set of circumstances that helped give rise to scholarship.

Another reason arose from the fact that the librarians at the Mouseion in Alexandria made a conscious attempt to compile a complete library of Greek literature and in so doing they noticed that different copies from different parts of the world showed serious discrepancies. This set of circumstances gave rise to a number of devices which also contributed to the birth of scholarship. The first was the decision to produce a standard text of the authors commonly read by the educated public. The next step was to ensure that fifth-century (BC) books coming from Attica, some of which were written in archaic Greek, were transliterated into the Greek then in use. Until 403 BC, Athens had used the archaic alphabet in which the letter epsilon was used for three vowels: epsilon, epsilon-iota and eta; and omicron was used for omicron, omicron-iota and omega.⁷⁶ Third was the invention of a system of accentuation which, in effect, preceded the idea of punctuation. Fourth, the commentary was introduced, a separate book which discussed shortcomings in the text of the classic. In the first instance, a set of critical signs was introduced, which were made in the margin of the text, and referred the reader to the appropriate place in the commentary (it was these marginal signs which later became *scholia*). The most important of the critical signs was the *obelos*, a horizontal stroke placed in the margin to the left of the verse and indicating that the verse was spurious. Other signs included the *diple* (>), which indicated any noteworthy point of content or language, the *antisigma* (⊃), indicating that the order of lines had been disturbed, and the *asteriskos* (✕), which marked a passage incorrectly repeated somewhere else.⁷⁷

In Rome this critical method of the Alexandrians was taken up by L. Aelius Stilo, active around 100 BC, who produced, among other things, lists of plays from both ancient Greece and early Rome which he regarded as genuine. He was interested in more than authenticity but, nevertheless, his approach and judgements, taken up by his pupil, Varro (116–27 BC), have determined in part what classics have come down to us. After this such authors as Seneca and Quintilian were always aware in Rome that texts could become corrupted and they often compared different copies of books with this in mind.

As the empire declined, and fewer books were produced, the continuity of classical culture came under threat. One way in which it was preserved was via the development of new forms of literature, the *epitome* and the *compendium*. The epitome is what we would mean by an ‘abridged version’, a short form of a book, containing its essence, often published together with other epitomes in a compendium. Although many details were lost in this way, the men who produced the compendia were forced to choose one version of a book over another, again exercising their critical judgement. Alongside the compendia, Romans also produced many commentaries which tell modern scholars which version of which classics were available, where, and when.⁷⁸

It was during these years of decline that learning and literacy combined to produce at least three sets of books which would have a major impact, not just in Rome, but in later medieval times. The first of these was Aelius Donatus’ two grammars, the *Ars Minor* and *Maior*, which, together with the *Institutiones grammaticae*, provided the Middle Ages with their main textbooks on grammar. The second was Nonius Marcellus’ *De compendiosa doctrina*, a dictionary particularly noteworthy because it contains many quotations from

works which are, for the moment, lost. And third there was Martianus Capella's *De nuptiis Mercurii*, an allegorical treatise on the seven liberal arts. The 'liberal arts' were the subjects deemed suitable for the education of a Roman gentleman and were originally conceived by Varro, under the influence of Posidonius (c. 151–135 BC). Varro produced an influential encyclopaedia, *Nine Books of Disciplines*, in which he outlined nine arts: grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, musical theory, medicine and architecture. Later writers omitted the last two arts.⁷⁹ In Rome, by the end of the first century AD, education had been more or less standardised and the seven liberal arts identified. In turn, these would become the basis of medieval education, when they split into two, the more elementary *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric and dialectic) and the more advanced *quadrivium* (arithmetic, music, geometry, astronomy). As we shall see in a later chapter, this system formed the basis of modern educational systems, and was one of the elements leading to the birth of the West.⁸⁰

The other main innovation in Rome, which affected learning and literacy, was the gradual disappearance of the scroll, in favour of the codex. This took place between the second and fourth centuries. There had always been an alternative to the scroll – this was the writing tablet, which usually consisted of wax-coated boards. These could be wiped clean and so were convenient for casual use: teaching, letters, rough notes. The Romans, however, started to use them for legal documents, gradually replacing the boards with parchment and fastening a number of pages together with a thong or clasp.⁸¹ Martial is the first author we know about to mention literary works being put together as a codex (in a poem written in the 80s), but the practice didn't seem to catch on at that time. It grew from the second century and really triumphed in the fourth, at least for pagan literature. It is not hard to see why the codex caught on. Papyrus rolls, though not fragile exactly, rarely lasted more than, say, three hundred years and it is likely that, had the change to codex not come when it did, many classical texts would have perished completely. The codex was much less bulky than the scroll, numbered pages made it a much handier reference format, it was less likely to be bruised in use, and it may well have been cheaper to produce.

But it seems that we have the early Christians to thank most for the codex. While the pagan codex was a rarity in the second century, it was much more common for Christian texts. This may have been because the Christians wanted to set themselves apart from pagans, and it may have been because codices were cheaper than scrolls. But it seems more likely that the codex was popular with Christians for an entirely different reason: with its format – numbered pages and a contents list – it was much harder to interpolate forgeries in a codex. In a young religion, when the accuracy and authoritativeness of the scriptures was a major concern, the advantages of the codex format would have been considerable.⁸²

The Greeks had invented the main forms of literature – epic, history, comedy, philosophy, tragedy, pastoral, lyric, oratory, didactic. Though many of the Roman authors are now treated as 'classics', in fact the only real advance on the Greeks, so far as literature is concerned, lay in two areas: love poetry and satire. Except for these innovations, it was acceptable in Rome for writers to emulate the Greeks – *imitatio* was a legitimate literary device, alongside *uariatio*.

Cicero (106–43 BC) was the most famous Roman writer who assimilated Greek culture.⁸³ Besides the oration, of which he was the supreme master, his writings consisted mainly of letters and treatises on various phases of Greek learning. His *On the Nature of the Gods* and *On Duties* are among the best sources of our knowledge of Greek religious and ethical thought. His works, which have always been studied as much for their literary elegance as for their philosophical content, were so important that he is widely regarded as second only to Aristotle among the contributors to the intellectual content of the Western cultural tradition.⁸⁴

Born into a well-to-do family, he trained as an advocate and was appointed to the office of augur, where his duties consisted of foretelling the future and interpreting omens. There was little in his work that was truly original but his style and the elegance of his Latin were unsurpassable: ‘Century after century learned its philosophical grammar from these works and they are still valuable.’⁸⁵ Roman Stoicism, the most influential philosophy of Cicero’s day, and his own viewpoint, was less a philosophy in the Greek sense, less a fundamental exploration of metaphysics, and more a practical, eclectic system concerned with morals, which in Rome had three main effects. The first was an overlap with Christianity, not so much in the writings of Cicero himself as of Seneca, who was often compared later on with St Jerome. At any rate, this played a part in the conversion of many pagans to Christianity. A second effect was on the Roman attitude to law. Stoicism included the idea that man should live according to nature and ‘Nature had a code of laws of which the philosopher could catch a glimpse.’⁸⁶ In this way the concept of ‘natural law’ was launched, which was to have a long history in European thought. Finally, Stoic ideas about ‘the brotherhood of man’ had a great effect in Rome on the treatment of slaves.

For Cicero, ‘True law is reason, right and natural . . . There will not be one law at Rome, one at Athens, or one now and one later . . .’ (*On the State*, III, 33). He was most concerned with harmony between the orders, co-operation between the middle-class non-senators and the Senate. He was, in Michael Grant’s words, a middle-of-the-road man: ‘to the two tyrannies, reaction and revolution, he was opposed, and whenever either of them became menacing he was on the other side.’⁸⁷ He was a liberal. ‘Indeed he is the greatest ancestor of that whole liberal tradition in western life.’

He was also the founder of *humanitas*, often called the essence of Ciceronianism. He believed that virtue ‘joins man to God’ and that from this it follows that all human beings, however humble, must count for something, and that this bond ‘joins man to man, irrespective of state, race or caste.’⁸⁸ By *humanitas*, he meant not just humanity, or humane-ness, or humanism, but consideration for others, tolerance, the liberal arts, education. In his translations of Greek works he adapted the smaller vocabulary of his native tongue to larger Greek ideas, inventing in the process such terms as *qualitas* and *quantitas*. The influence of Cicero on European ideas ‘greatly exceeds that of any other prose writer, in any language.’ Pope Gregory the Great went so far as to say he wished he could destroy Cicero’s writings since ‘they diverted men’s attention from the scriptures.’⁸⁹ Though not a party to the assassination of Caesar, Cicero approved the act, yet thought that Antony’s tyranny, which came after, even worse, and spoke out. As a result, he was himself assassinated in December 43 BC. (He was reading Euripides’ *Medea* when the assassins caught up with him.)

Virgil (c. 70–19 BC) has been described as the poet laureate of the Augustan age. His *Eclogues* and his *Georgics* formed a type of apprenticeship to his great epic, the *Aeneid*, the Roman counterpart of the Homeric sagas, in which Augustus is openly disguised as Aeneas. By coincidence, the family of the Julii, to which both Caesar and Augustus belonged, claimed descent from Iulus, son of Aeneas, who was a character in the *Iliad*. Virgil's epic is accordingly typically Homeric, in that Aeneas wanders the Mediterranean, from Troy to the Tiber, in the manner of the *Odyssey*, and, in the second half, fights great battles in Italy, reminiscent of the *Iliad*.⁹⁰ In addition to its parallels with Homer, however, the book is a cipher: Aeneas is Augustus and the book is a disquisition on the nature of power. A central theme is *pietas*, which has two meanings, the Roman sense of obligation – to parents, the state, to God – and pity, but not in a conventional or modern sense. Aeneas has pity for other characters, Dido his wife and Turnus his enemy, but he leaves the former and kills the latter. This is Virgil's comment on war: it destroys equally those that we love and those whom we hate. Far from being an idealisation of Rome and imperial power, the ending is ambiguous. Virgil's humanity is of a piece with Cicero's, matching him in tenderness and sympathy.

Given the way power and the centres of civilisation shifted in the Mediterranean at, roughly speaking, the time of Jesus, it is no surprise to find that the foremost authority in medicine in antiquity followed those changes. Claudius Galen decided on a medical career when he was sixteen. Born at Pergamum in AD 131, he studied mathematics and philosophy before turning to medicine, travelling to Smyrna (the modern Izmir), Corinth and Alexandria in pursuit of his studies. He returned to Pergamum as physician to the gladiators, but finally settled in the powerhouse of Rome, where he became a fashionable doctor to the rich and famous, including the emperors Marcus Aurelius, Commodus and Septimius Severus. He died around 210. His surviving writings occupy twenty-two volumes in the standard nineteenth-century edition, which confirm his dominant position in the ancient world: rivalled only by Hippocrates, Galen's influence extended well into the modern period.⁹¹

It has been well said of Galen that he was more interested in the disease than the patient, 'viewing the latter as a vehicle by which to gain understanding of the former'. From Hippocrates, he took the notion of the four humours, the view that the four basic constituents of the human body are blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile, reducible to the fundamental qualities of hot and cold, wet and dry. Galen refined this, to argue that the four humours come together in different ways to form the tissues, and that these organs unite to make up the body. For him, disease occurred when there was either a disequilibrium among the humours or within the state of specific organs, and one of his main innovations was to localise disease in these particular organs. Generalised fevers, for example, were caused by putrefying humours throughout the body, producing heat, whereas localised illnesses stemmed from toxic humours in individual organs, leading to swelling, or hardening, or pain.⁹² In making diagnoses, Galen in particular examined the pulse and the urine, but he was also alive to changes in the patient's posture, breathing, 'the nature of the upper and lower secretions', and the presence or absence of headache.

He was aware of the importance of anatomy but conceded that in his day the dissection of humans was no longer possible. He therefore urged his students to be alive to the

fortuitous possibility of making observations, as for example when a tomb was opened, or at the scene of an accident, and he recommended a visit to Alexandria, 'where the skeleton could still be examined first-hand'.⁹³ In general though, he acknowledged that his students would have to rely on the anatomy of animals, especially those species who resembled humans. He himself dissected several creatures, including a small monkey known then as the barbary ape, what we call the macaque. In doing this, he built on Plato's idea that there was a 'tripartite soul', arguing that the brain, the seat of the soul's rational faculties, was the source of the nerves; the heart, the seat of the passions, was the source of the arteries, conveying arterial blood to all parts of the body; and the liver, the seat of the appetite, or desire, was the source of the veins, which fortify the body with venous blood. Food, arriving in the stomach, was converted into juice (*chyle*), partly by 'cooking' through the body's heat, then absorbed through the lining of the stomach into surrounding veins, where it was passed to the liver. There it was further refined and cooked and converted into venous blood which nourished the various organs. Venous blood reached the heart, to nourish it, but the heart also received arterial blood, from the lungs. This blood provided life and it too was passed on to the organs. The brain, like other organs, received arterial blood. Here Galen made a particular mistake in arguing that this blood passes into the *rete mirabile*, a fine network of arteries he had found by dissection in certain ungulates and which he mistakenly thought existed in humans. In this network, he said, arterial blood was refined to 'the finest grade' of spirit or pneuma, the psychic pneuma, which was sent to all parts of the body through the nerves, accounting for sensation and motor functions.⁹⁴

There is far more to Galen's sophisticated system than this, but it is enough to show the architecture of his thinking. This thinking was to dominate medical ideas throughout the Middle Ages and as far as the early modern period, and owed something to one of his other concepts. Although he wasn't a Christian, Galen believed in teleology, which made him appeal to both Christians and Muslims. Inspired by Plato's *Timaeus*, and Aristotle's *The Parts of Animals*, he concluded that there was 'intelligent design' in the human and animal form, and in his treatises he praised the 'wisdom and providence' of the Demiurge, an understanding clearly derived from Plato. Galen thought that the structure of the human body was perfectly adapted to its functions, 'unable to be improved upon even in imagination'.⁹⁵ This was the beginnings of a natural theology, a theory of god or the gods based in the evidence found in nature.

Utilitas, Roman unsentimentality and pride in her achievements, had a major effect on innovation in the visual arts. Portraits had become more realistic in Greece but they were still, to an extent, idealised. Not so in Rome. The emperor might want his likeness to echo the dignity of his office, but for other families the more realistic the better. There was a tradition in Rome, among patrician families at least, to keep wax masks of one's ancestors, to be worn by living members of the family at funerals. Out of these there developed bronze and stone busts, very realistic.⁹⁶

In architecture the discovery of concrete made all the difference. Invented towards the end of the third century, possibly via Africa, it was found that a mixture of water, lime and a gritty material like sand would set into a durable substance which could be used either

to bond masonry or as a building material in its own right and one which, up to a point, could be shaped in a mould. This had two immediate consequences. It meant that major public buildings, such as baths or theatres, could be brought into the centre of the city. Large boulders did not need to be brought from far away – instead, the sand could be transported in smaller, much more manageable loads, and far more complex infrastructures could be erected, to accommodate larger numbers of people. Second, since concrete could be shaped when wet, it didn't have to be carved, as stone did. Therefore, it required less-skilled workmen, and even slaves could do the job. It was, in consequence, much cheaper. All this meant that monumental architecture could be practised on a much larger scale than before, which is one reason why Rome is the city of so many classical ruins today.⁹⁷

The other development in the visual arts in Rome stemmed from the idea of 'the classics' mentioned earlier. This, as was said above, was originally a Roman idea and grew out of the feeling that, although Rome had triumphed over classical Greece, and although many Romans thought the Greeks effete and even effeminate, there was in Rome immense respect for Greek culture. (Defending the Greek poet Archias on a charge of illegally claiming Roman citizenship, Cicero said: 'Greek literature is read in nearly every nation under heaven, while Latin is confined to its own boundaries, and they are, we must grant, narrow.' He himself aimed to write 'in the Aristotelian manner'.)⁹⁸ From the first century BC on, Greek sculpture, and copies of Greek sculpture, were found in many upper-class homes in Rome. Many of these copies were very good and today much of Greek sculpture is known only, or mainly, through Roman copies which are, of course, now very valuable in their own right.⁹⁹ To begin with, Roman generals plundered what they could: in 264 two thousand statues were looted from Volsinii.¹⁰⁰ (George Meredith once said that the one abstract idea which the military mind is able to grasp is that of booty.¹⁰¹) Greek artists quickly adjusted and a thriving art market grew up in Athens (the so-called Neo-Attic workshops) catering to the taste of Roman tourists. Later still, Greek artists set up shop along the Tiber.¹⁰² Rome itself, in a way, was an amalgam of Greek ideas and Latin ambition but, thanks in part to concrete, there is much more left of it than Athens.

Although Rome did not achieve the intellectual creativity of the classical Greeks (there is little evidence, for example, of Romans carrying out original mathematical work), their achievements lay elsewhere. The finest epitaph is still that of the eighteenth-century English historian Edward Gibbon: 'If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus [AD 180]. The vast extent of the Roman empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom. The armies were restrained by the firm and gentle hand of four successive emperors, whose characters and authority commanded involuntary respect. The forms of the civil administration were carefully preserved by Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian and the Antonines, who delighted in the image of liberty, and were pleased with considering themselves as the accountable ministers of the laws.'¹⁰³

Even if this verdict is no longer accepted in its entirety, the fact that the sentiment stood for so long is a testament to the many successes of Rome.