



## The fascinating world of ancient Rome

### Description

## ... and some links to partake in its history

By Irwin Rapoport

June 23, 2021

I would have loved to have seen a performance of **Red Bull Theater's** recent revival of Ben Jonson's ***Sejanus, His Fall***, which **Byron Toben** reviewed in his recent column, [Play inspires research into roman emperors](#), as ancient Rome has always fascinated me, particularly the fall of the Roman Republic and the civil wars that led to **Gaius Octavius**, **Gaius Julius Caesar's** nephew, becoming Rome's first emperor and founder of the [Julio-Claudian dynasty](#) that gave us **Tiberius**, **Gaius** (better known as Caligula), **Claudius**, and **Nero**.

The study and appreciation of Roman history and its feats – military, political, engineering (roads, bridges, aqueducts, baths, town planning, etc.) have fascinated people for many centuries and have been the subject of books (histories and novels), plays, films, and television series.

[Lucius Aelius Sejanus](#) was an ambitious and horrible man who didn't blink an eye if murder and other nasty actions were required to advance his career and power under **Tiberius**, Rome's second emperor from 14 to 37 AD. As the Prefect of the Praetorian Guard, Sejanus had direct access to Tiberius and via that position, became the main advisor to the emperor who spent much of his time outside of the city of Rome, especially at his villa on the isle of Capri, where he was able to indulge in bringing his very depraved sexual fantasies and desires to life. To be fair to Tiberius, he had a terrible mother – the mother from hell who forced him to divorce **Vipsania**, a woman he truly loved and adored. **Livia** was keen on her son succeeding her husband, **Octavius**.



According to legend, Rome was founded in 753 BC by Romulus and Remus, who were raised by a she-wolf – Image: [Capitoline Museums](#), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Toben referred to the brilliant 13-part [I Claudius](#) series that aired on PBS's Masterpiece Theatre in 1976 and for many in North America, introduced a young **Sir Derek Jacobi**, along with a stellar cast of actors such as **Patrick Stewart** (Sejanus), **John Hurt** (Caligula), and **Sian Philips** (Livia). The series is based on two novels by British poet **Robert Graves**, *I Claudius* and *Claudius the God*, which I highly recommend. In fact, I have two first editions of *I Claudius* that I was fortunate to find at garage sales and very much treasure.

Both novels were based on [Suetonius' The Twelve Caesars](#), which Graves translated for the Penguin editions, as well as the histories written by [Tacitus](#) and other Roman historians. The books by Graves, written as a secret autobiography penned by Claudius, cover the era from Augustus (Octavius) to **Claudius'** last days. They are well worth reading and can be read before delving into [Suetonius and Tacitus's The Annals](#) that covered the reigns of Tiberius and Claudius. Alas, the other sections of the book are lost. And of course, after all the reading, one can truly enjoy and appreciate the *I Claudius* series.



The Roman Forum, the political, economic, cultural, and religious center of the city during the Republic and later Empire – Image: [A derivative work of a 3D model by Lasha Tskhondia – L.VII.C., CC BY-SA 3.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons

The study and appreciation of Roman history and its feats – military, political, engineering (roads, bridges, aqueducts, baths, town planning, etc.) have fascinated people for many centuries and have been the subject of books (histories and novels), plays, films, and television series. Some get it right and many are completely off the mark. However, this can be considered a tribute to what is referred to as the grandeur that was Rome. The city of Rome, or *Roma*, is referred to as “the eternal city” and that would not have surprised ancient Romans. And of course, we have the phrases of “all roads lead to Rome” and “when in Rome, do as the Romans would do.”

We also have Latin phrases that are commonly used today such as *quid pro quo*, *cui bono*, *pro bono*, *in camera*, and *et tu, Brute?*

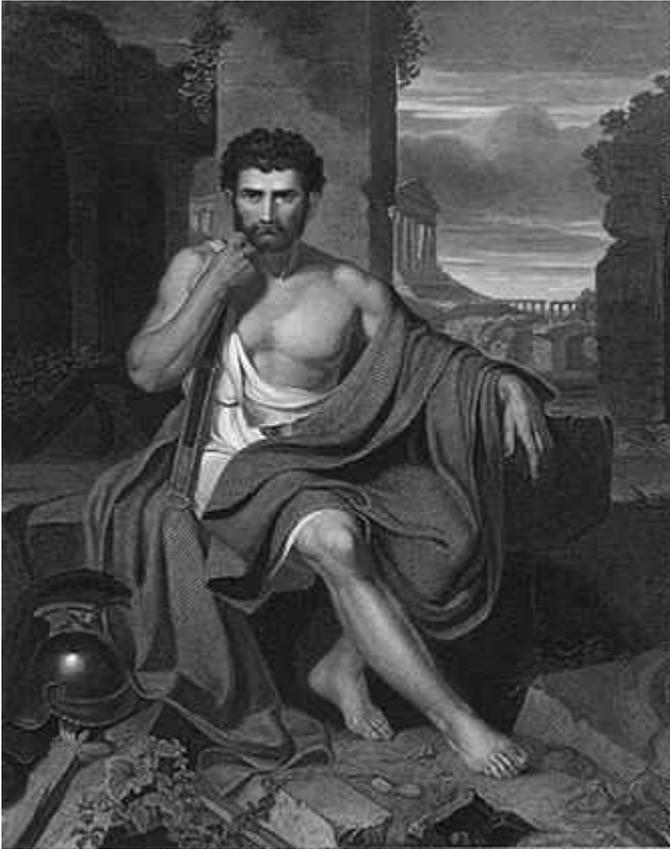


The Colosseum, an iconic symbol of Imperial Rome, was listed as one of the New7Wonders of the World – Image: [FeaturedPics](#), [CC BY-SA 4.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons

The Romans produced some brilliant literature such as the many works of **Marcus Tullius Cicero** – dialogues, essays, speeches, and his voluminous correspondence with friends and family; [Caesar's Gallic War](#) and [Civil War](#); [Lucretius' On the Nature of Things](#); the plays of [Terence](#) and [Plautus](#); the many books written by [Ovid](#); and many others.

This [link](#) for Roman literature provides the basics on who's who in the Roman literary world. There are many books to read.

Below are some links for key figures in Roman history. The Wikipedia pages are good primers and contain links for other individuals, events, various political offices, and geographic locations, as well as having excellent bibliographies in regards to books, articles and websites to further studies and reading. Those who are attending Montreal's universities or are alumni can easily, once the pandemic is over, access their libraries to pour over their collections of Roman authors and scholarly works.



Gaius Marius, a Roman general and politician who dramatically reformed the Roman military – Image: [John Vanderlyn](#), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

To learn more about the start of the fall of the Roman Republic, check out:

[\*\*Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus\*\*](#)

[\*\*Gaius Sempronius Gracchus\*\*](#)

Following the deaths of the two brothers, the struggle for control of the Republic brought these people into the fray:

[\*\*Gaius Marius\*\*](#)

[\*\*Lucius Cornelius Sulla Felix\*\*](#)

[\*\*Quintus Caecilius Metellus Pius\*\*](#)

Following the death of Sulla in 78 BC, the temporary stability that he gave Rome at great cost and long-lasting precedents that helped bring down the Republic, led to the creation of the First Triumvirate (60 – 53 BC), which brought together the ambitions of:

[\*\*Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus\*\*](#)

[\*\*Marcus Licinius Crassus\*\*](#)

## [Gaius Julius Caesar](#)

The death of Crassus in battle led to the end of the First Triumvirate and the Civil War between Caesar and Pompey. To learn more about this, go to [Caesar's Civil War](#)

Caesar won the civil war, which put the Caesarian party in charge of the Roman world, but that ended with the death of Caesar in 44 BC, just before he was about to depart Rome for the expedition against Parthia. The death of Caesar led to the creation of the Second Triumvirate that brought together:

## [Marcus Antonius](#)



The Augustus of Prima Porta, 1st century AD, depicting Augustus, the first Roman emperor – Image: [Vatican Museums](#), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

## [Gaius Octavius](#)

## [Marcus Aemilius Lepidus](#)

The conflict between Octavius and Antony and his partner [Cleopatra](#) ended the Roman civil wars and led to Octavius becoming the first Roman emperor in 27 BC although he would say he was the First Citizen in the Republic, with powers given to him to safeguard and guide the affairs of the Roman Empire.



Here are links to some of the fascinating Romans who lived during the fall of the Republic. Many of them played for keeps and lost their lives in the struggle to be the top dog. Roman politics was not for the faint-hearted.

### [Quintus Sertorius](#)

[Aulus Gabinius](#), who secured the passage of the [Lex Gabinia](#), which gave Pompey Magnus command of a huge army and fleet to end piracy in the Mediterranean.

[Marcus Tullius Cicero](#), who is worthy of a separate article

### [Lucius Licinius Lucullus](#)

[Publius Clodius Pulcher](#), the loose cannon and effective politician, and his brother [Appius Clodius Pulcher](#)

[Marcus Calpurnius Bibulus](#), an opponent of Caesar and his co-consul in 59 BC

[Sextus Pompeius](#), the son of Pompey Magnus

Women were also key players, such as [Clodia](#), the sister of Claudius and Appius, and **Fulvia**, who was married to Claudius and Antony. She was extremely talented, formidable, and ambitious. She did not suffer fools gladly.

To better understand how the Roman Republic worked on a day-to-day basis, visit these links:

[Cursus honorum](#), to learn more about the various positions that could be held and how one eventually became consul. These positions were vied for by members of the [Optimates](#) and the [Populares](#)

To become better acquainted with Roman oratory, check out this excellent lecture on Youtube, presented by **Dr. Gregory Aldrete**. The lecture focuses on what Cicero taught us about oratory and how to be a skilled orator. The insights that Dr. Aldrete provides us, not only help to explain what happened in ancient Rome, but stress how much things have not changed since the era of Cicero.

I hope that these links will provide you with stellar reading and serve as an introduction to the fascinating world of Rome. There is much we can learn as the Romans were, in one sense, extremely similar to us and at the same time, completely alien in terms of their ideas and appreciation of death in the arena via gladiatorial games.

'The problems that the people dealt with in the past are constantly being repeated. The bigger question and one that cannot really be answered is thus – will we ever learn the lessons of history?'

The ancient world has much to teach us and the study of the Romans is just one element of that inquiry. Finding out more about the ancient Greeks, Egyptians and Jews brings this world to life and stresses the point that the more things change, the more they stay the same. The problems that the people dealt with in the past are constantly being repeated. The bigger question and one that cannot really be answered is thus – will we ever learn the lessons of history?

*Feature image: Derek Jacobi (Claudius), John Hurt (Caligula) and George Baker (Tiberius) in I, Claudius (1976), BBC*



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