

City of Rome in the imperial era

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The paper is aiming to describe individual aspects of life in Rome of Caesars. The unique status of the metropolis of the Roman Empire was reflected in the privileges, but also in hardships of everyday life affecting the majority of inhabitants of Rome. Thanks to generosity of emperors and enormously rich individuals, average Romans were receiving free grain and had access to luxurious spas, to Coliseum – a place of bloody gladiatorial combats and to the largest horse racing track in the Empire. On the other side they must bear discomfort of living in high risers, without running water and canalization and suffer a constant noise of metropolis which never sleeps. In a concise manner the attention is given to the material and spiritual sphere, to the deep differences in the mode of life between rich and average Romans, with the aim to describe, at least episodically, an atmosphere of Rome in the Era of Caesars.

Key words: Rome. The Era of Caesars. Daily life.

The monumental victory, which Rome achieved after a bloody struggle with Carthage ushered a number of changes affecting Roman society. Republican institutions lost their sanctity kept in reverence for centuries. The age of military dictators dawned upon Rome.

Transformation of the Republic into the Empire was preceded by horrifying convulsions of citizen war.

Rome, shaken to the ground, found stability in a new political arrangement created by Octavian Augustus, which adroitly veiled the dictate of one man under veneer of the Principate. Historian Edward Gibbon wrote: „*To resume, in a few words, the system of the Imperial government; as it was instituted by Augustus, and maintained by those princes who understood their own interest and that of the people, it may be defined as an absolute monarchy disguised by the form of commonwealth.*”¹

In changing world of nascent Roman Empire, no other place underwent more profound transformation than the City of Rome. Explosive growth of population went hand-in-hand with shifts in the ethnic and social composure of inhabitants of the metropolis. Ring of legions guarding „Pax Romana” eliminated the need for city fortifications. The Great Wall, though allegedly built by King Servius Tullius, but in reality erected on the basis of order of the Senate between 378 – 352 B. C.,² lost protective purpose and preserved only its religious character.

Unceasing migration into the Rome resulted in ever increasing need of living space, of food, water and other necessities. To secure of all this placed an enormous strain upon engineering and logistic abilities of city magistrates.

One of the most glaring achievements was Rome’s water system. Aqueducts, in cumulative length totaling 2000 kilometers, were supplying Rome with some billion liters of drinking water daily. During the Principate of Augustus this achievement was largely due to work of Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa. In one year (33 B.C.), as an aedilis,³ he initiated construction of

1 GIBBON, Edward. *The decline and fall of the Roman Empire*. New York : Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1960, p. 38.

2 CARCOPINO, Jérôme. *Daily life in ancient Rome*. New Haven, London : Yale University Press, 1975, p. 12.

3 An official empowered to manage infrastructure of city.

170 public baths, construction of the Julian aqueduct, and facilitated access to water sources throughout city by drilling of 700 wells, setting-up 500 fountains and 130 reservoirs.⁴

More detailed information in regard to the water system of Rome is given by Sextus Julius Frontinus. In his work, written at the close of the first century A. D., devoted mostly to a military science, he included the chapter *De aquis urbis Romae*, describing technicalities of water distribution in Rome. In this chapter he describes in detail location, length and type of construction of each aqueduct. He proudly proclaimed value of practicality of Roman engineering: „*Who will venture to compare with these mighty conduits the idle Pyramids, or the famous but useless works of the Greeks?*”⁵

There were, however, significant differences in the access to the water sources. Housing accommodations in Rome could be divided to two basic types – houses (*domus*) built for private use only of one owner and multi-stored buildings (*cenacula*) with numerous flats (*insulae*) rented to tenants. According to the cadastral of buildings existing in Rome (*Regionaries*) from the second century A. D., the total number of houses was approximately 1000 and tenant buildings 46 000.⁶

In regard to access to the water, houses were in a great advantage – they could tap desired quantity of water directly from the public wells. This allowed construction of baths and in some luxurious houses even swimming pools. *Cenacula* lacked equipment capable of supplying water to the higher floors. This caused a considerable inconvenience especially to tenants of top floors.

As in every metropolis, also in Rome there was an extreme scarcity of living space. Therefore, with a few exceptions, houses were built outside of the city center. Still, only very rich had a privilege to have a house in Rome. The characteristic *domus* was constructed as a sequence of halls usually built in following order: *fauces*, *atrium*, *alae*, *triclinium*, *tablinum*.⁷ Halls were grouped around colonnaded court – *peristyle*, where, if space was large enough, a garden was established.⁸

Rich did not display their wealth outwardly. The front side of Roman house consisted of unbroken solid wall. However, inside the house was furnished with an artistic splendor – floors were made of marble, or tiles, in some cases covered by colorful mosaics. Mosaics, mostly depicting scenes from mythology, were painstakingly created from multicolored cubes (*tesserae*), which preserved their brightness and beauty even today.

The Romans, in contrast to the Greeks, did not create works of art which would command admiration throughout millennia. But, they appreciated beauty imbedded in marble or bronze and filled their homes with statues made by Greek artists. Walls served as large canvases for paintings. Paintings, done as *frescos* – images painted on freshly plastered wall – covered the whole walls. This way, according to W. Durant „...*the mural became a part of the house, an integral item in the architectural design.*”⁹

Interiors of houses excavated in Pompey, which contain some 3500 preserved frescoes, though they hardly matched a splendor of luxurious houses of Rome, are still offering an insight into an artistic embellishment of Roman houses.

4 DURANT, Will. *The story of civilisation : part III. Caesar and Christ*. New York : Simon and Schuster, 1944, pp. 219-220.

5 DURANT, W. *The story...*, pp. 327-328.

6 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, p. 20.

7 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, p. 24.

8 GRANT, Michael. *History of Rome*. New York : Charles Scribner´s Sons, 1978, p. 160.

9 DURANT, W. *The story...*, p. 352.

Not surprisingly, considering their absolute power and command of financial sources, pinnacle of luxurious living was enjoyed by emperors. An almost incredible prodigality applied in construction of his palace, fittingly named „The Golden House“ (Domus aurea), exhibited the Emperor Nero. Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, a historian writing in the first century A.D., described Nero’s palace „*The entrance hall was large enough to contain a huge statue of himself, 120 feet high; and the pillared arcade ran for a whole mile. An enormous pool, like a sea, was surrounded by buildings made to resemble cities, and by landscape garden consisting of ploughed fields, vineyards, pastures, and woodlands – where every variety of domestic and wild animal roamed about. Parts of house were overlaid with gold and studded precious stones and mother-of-pearl. All the dining-rooms had ceilings of fretted ivory, the panes of which could slide back and let rain of flowers, or of perfume from hidden sprinklers, shower upon his guests... When a palace had been decorated through in this lavish style, Nero dedicated it, and allegedly condescended to remark: Good, now I can at last begin to live like a human being!*“¹⁰

The outrageous excesses of Nero’s palace roused a wave of negative sentiments from Romans. A poem written by poet Martial mirrored these feelings – „*Here where the heavenly colossus has a close view of the stars ... There once shone the hated hall of the cruel king. And one house took up the whole of Rome. Here where rises the huge mass of the awesome amphitheatre, in sight of all was Nero’s pool.*“¹¹

The anger of Romans at Nero’s largesse in building the Golden House was enhanced by rumors that a catastrophic fire which erupted on July 18, 64 A. D. and destroyed two thirds of Rome, was started on Emperor’s command. However, Tacitus, an author of a monumental work depicting history of the Imperial Rome, though very critical to of emperors in general, abstained from unequivocal blame of Nero: „*Whether it was accidental or caused by a criminal act on the part of the Emperor is uncertain – both versions have supporters... the most terrible and destructive fire which Rome had ever experienced... began in the Circus, where adjoins the Palatine and Caelian Hills. Breaking out in shops selling inflammable goods, and fanned by the wind, the conflagration instantly grew and swept the whole length of Circus.*“¹² Disaster allegedly roused a bizarre reaction from the Emperor. According to Tacitus „*...a rumor spread that, while the city was burning, Nero had gone on his private stage and, comparing modern calamities with ancient, had sung of the destruction of Troy.*“¹³

The extent of destruction was catastrophic – of fourteen districts only four remained undamaged.

But, besides Nero’s quixotic behavior, Tacitus recorded, that there had also been a rational reaction on part the Emperor. He allegedly issued guidelines for rebuilding of Rome: „*Street-fronts were of regulated alignment, streets were broad, and houses built around courtyards. Their height was restricted, and their frontages protected by colonnades. Nero undertook to erect these at his own expense... A fixed proportion of every building had to be massive, untimbered stone from Gabii or Alba (these stones being fireproof). Furthermore, guards were to ensure a more abundant and extensive public water-supply, hitherto diminished by irregular private enterprise. House-holders were obliged to keep fire-fighting apparatus in an accessible place; and semi-detached houses were forbidden – they must have their own walls.*“¹⁴

10 SUETONIUS, Gaius Tranquillus. *Twelve Caesars*. New York : Viking Pinguin Inc., 1986, p. 229.

11 GRIFFIN, Miriam T. *Nero. The end of a dynasty*. New Haven, London : Yale University Press, 1985, p. 138. The people of Rome called excessively big statue of Nero „Colossus“.

12 TACITUS, Cornelius. *The Annals of Imperial Rome*. New York : Dorset Press, 1984, p. 362.

13 TACITUS, C. *The Annals...*, p. 362.

14 TACITUS, C. *The Annals...*, pp. 364-365.

Rome, however, was not only the city of rich and super rich. Overwhelming share of inhabitants were people of limited income – laborers, artisans, shop-keepers, street hawkers and purveyors of hundreds professions. Besides them, there was a mass of people utterly dependent on various forms of social dole – from free distribution of grain to access to popular public games. Another significant segment of Rome inhabitants constituted slaves.

The lowest estimation of population of Rome, computed by the German historian Karl Julius Beloch, was 800 000 inhabitants in time of the early Empire, up to 1,6 million estimated by another German antiquarian Joachim Marquardt. In the middle between these numbers estimated size of Roman populace English historian Edward Gibbon.¹⁵

All these people were living in already mentioned renting houses – insulae, which were built to ever increasing heights. Due to extreme height, the stability of insulae became so perilous, that Octavian Augustus decreed their maximal height to be no more than 20 meters. Still, scarcity of living space led builders to circumvent this limitation. An example of disregard for limits was the Insula of Felicula, which became famous by its monstrosity. According to J. Carcopino, „*Despite the edicts of Augustus and Trajan, the audacity of the builders had redoubled and the Insula of Felicula towered above the Rome of the Antonines like asky-scraper.*”¹⁶

The urgent need of living space inevitably compromised security of buildings elevated to such a dizzying heights, especially when builders tried to save costs as much as they could. Consequently, breakdown of insulae was no exception, turning these shoddy structures into deadly traps. With the aim to lower the pressure of floors, builders were inserting wooden beams and this, together with use of other flammable materials, created an almost ideal conditions for occurrence of fires. Already a bosom friend of Julius Caesar, Marcus Licinius Crassus, realized that fires, frequently erupting in Rome, could help him to multiply his wealth. Fire brigades which he established, were the first fire-fighting units in the Roman history. Crassus bought buildings which were burning and greatly damaged or destroyed by fire at token price, his squads of fire fighters extinguished fire, and built in place of a burned building a new insula, which he sold with profit.

The necessity to prevent or at least contain fires led also Augustus – to organize vigiles who were patrolling Rome during night.

Fear of fires could be one of reasons that contributed to a scarcity of furniture in the Roman dwellings. The principal object of household furnishing was a bed. Poor people contented themselves with rudimentary beds – a platform built of masonry covered with sheets. Wealthier persons slept in more elaborate beds, either single ones (lectuli) or double (lecti geniales). Beds were mostly made of wood, some were cast in bronze. Depending on economic status of owner, beds could be inlaid with tortoise-shells or gilded with silver or gold.

Unlike in bygone times of early Republic, when a simple fare of bread and vegetables was everyday meal of Romans, dining becomes a significant event, especially for well-to-do. For affluent people feasting was a fancy occasion. The guests were ushered into a dining room (triclinia) by a special servant (nomenclator) where they reclined on couches positioned around tables. Each guest obtained a knife and spoons of various shapes. Forks, however, were not known. Romans ate with their fingers, and cleanness was maintained by frequent washing of hands. Feast (cena) consisted of a minimal seven courses (fercula): – the hors d’oeuvres (gustatio), three entrées, two roasts and the dessert (secundae mensae). Meals were washed down initially with honey wine (mulsum), followed by various wines administered by waiters (ministratores). Wine, stored in amphorae was poured into a large bowl (cratera) and mixed

15 DURANT, W. *The story...*, p. 364.

16 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, p. 26.

with a certain quantity of water, depending on taste of host. This restraint in the content of alcohol, however, was compromised by a sort of drinking competition (*commissatio*) which started after a dinner. These feasts were not gatherings done in a hurry. They lasted up to ten hours. Feasting not consisted only from eating and drinking. Entertainment was provided by a variety of musicians, acrobats and lascivious female dancers.

In many cases these luxurious dinners led to excesses which characterized vanity and arrogant display of wealth by *nouveau riche*. Unlike Lucius Licinius Lucullus, who in a true fashion of connoisseur elevated culinary art to a high level, the Era of Imperial Rome was rather symbolized by grotesque behavior of newly rich possessing the only one ability – to make money. A paragon of such a man, a fictitious former slave named Trimalchio, was immortalized by a caustic satire of Roman historian Petronius in his work the *Satiricon*. Samuel Dill, an author of monograph dealing with issues of social life of Rome in the Age of Emperors, in regard to the *Satiricon* wrote: „*The Satiricon... is full of humorous exaggeration and wild Aristophanic fun, along with, here and there, very subtle and refined delineation of character... Petronius, it is clear, enjoyed his work, and, in spite of his contempt for the vulgar ambition and the coarseness and commonness of Trimalchio's class, he has a liking for certain simplicity and honest good nature in Trimalchio.*”¹⁷

The story of Trimalchio epitomized an ascent of a new class – enterprising, inhibition free and pragmatic freedmen. These people took-up an opportunity offered to them by a transition of the Roman society – advent of wealth and improved status of slaves which resulted in a growing number of slaves freed by their masters, who were motivated either by economic or humanitarian reasons. Freedmen (*libertini*) cleverly exploit a negative attitude of privileged Romans toward economic enterprise with the exception of agriculture. The Senatorial class, as a whole, was prohibited to actively participate on business activities by a law. Many of them circumvented this exclusion by employing trustworthy slaves who, in time, became wealthy and could buy not only freedom but also assume important positions in the Roman society. Coming from humble origins, many of them could not resist temptation to display their material success in a vulgar manner.

Economic and social success of freedmen irritated Roman patricians, and their behavior, indicating humble origins, was ridiculed. Petronius' *Satiricon* is an artistic reaction, pointing to intellectual and moral shallowness of freedmen. The story is a description of an opulent dinner given by Trimalchio, a former slave who made a fortune. During feast Trimalchio entertains his guests telling them story of his life, whereas choice foods and wines are served and feast is interspersed by acts of outrageous lewdness. W. Durant characterized the *Satiricon* as a masterly satire written by a Roman patrician who was drawing a picture of a mental world of parvenu – „... *we must count it the merciless caricature of the nouveau riche freedman by a patrician who had never earned his keep. There is no mercy in the book, no tenderness, no ideal; immorality and corruption are taken for granted, and the life of the underworld is presented with gusto, without indignation, and without comment. Here the gutter flows directly into classic literature.*”¹⁸

A great majority of Romans, however, lived in much simpler and less pleasant conditions. Because *cenacula* lacked heating and running water, tenants stayed inside as little as possible. Discomfort was enhanced by an absence of glass windows. Only shutters or hangers stood in the way of cold during the winter moons.

17 DILL, Samuel. *Roman society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius*. New York : Meridian Books, 1960, pp. 124, 128.

18 DURANT, W. *The story...*, pp. 298-299.

The most valuable space in insula was ground floor called domus. Unlike upper floors, it had water brought in from public source. It had also a heating system, hypocaustum, suspended under living quarters and isolated by layer of bricks and pavement of tiles or marble. Unlike cenacula, domus was equipped with a private restroom, so tenants of domus were not compelled to use public restroom – forica. On the basis of excavations in Pompei and Ostia, J. Carcopino described foricae of Rome as a places which, to us, shockingly lacked a privacy: „*The Roman forica was public in full sense of the term... People met there, conversed, and exchanged invitations to dinner without embarrassment.*”¹⁹

The Romans spent most of their time outside houses in streets, workshops, baths, theatres or amphitheatres. Despite the low opinion in regard to manual work held by upper strata of the Roman society, Rome was a humming hive of laborious activity. Retail stores and workshops of artisans were mostly located in first floors of buildings.

Similarly like cramped conditions in private dwellings, neither the streets of Rome offered much space. In contrast to network of excellent consular roads connecting provinces with the Capital, streets of Rome formed a web of convoluted and twisted passages built haphazardly without an unified design. This disorderly lay-out is even more surprising when we take to consideration that their total length was imposing – almost 90 kilometers in time of the Emperor Vespasian. To cite J. Carcopino: „*Among all the innumerable streets of Rome, only two inside the old Republican Wall could justly claim the name of via. They were Via Sacra and the Via Nova, which respectively crossed and flanked the Forum...*”²⁰

In comparison to the consular roads, which were wide up-to 6, 50 meters, city streets were mere passages. Especially the itinera could be used only by men on foot. Little broader actus allowed transport of one cart. Only viae, such as mentioned Via Sacra and Via Nova, permitted two carts to pass each other. A majority of streets was slightly narrower than three meters. Their nearness, though made traffic difficult, offered also a consolation. The streets, shaded by protruding balconies from buildings which lined streets on both sides, were this way to certain extent protected from scorching sun during hot summers.

To maintain cleanness of streets, if traffic should flow at all, was imperative. Already Julius Caesar ordered owners of building to keep front of their property meticulously clean. Ignoring this order resulted in a severe penalty. Streets of Rome lacked lighting and after nightfall passages were immersed into darkness. This facilitated spreading of crime, only insufficiently fought-of by sentries of armed watchmen.

The commotion of people in congested Rome was so intensive, that carriages and transports of any kind were prohibited during day. Only after dark an immense number of vehicles entered Rome’s streets, causing incessant noise during the whole night. That this noisy rumbling was robbing Romans of sleep, testifies Juvenal in his epigram: „*The crossing of wagons in the narrow streets, the swearing of drovers brought to a standstill, would snatch sleep from a sea-calf to Emperor Claudius himself.*”²¹ There were, however, a few exceptions when vehicles were allowed into streets during day – on days of religious ceremonies the Vestales and the Flamines were driven during processions in chariots. Also a person awarded with highest honor – a triumph, enjoyed triumphal procession in a festive chariot. Rich, who refused to bear a discomfort of walking through a mass of commoners, were traveling in litters carried by slaves.

19 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, p. 41.

20 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, p. 45.

21 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, p. 50.

What brought crowds of Romans into a dusty swelter of congested roads? – reason was same like today – shopping. In the Era of Emperors, the City of Rome became a magnet absorbing products of the whole Empire. A global nature of market which was to disposal of Romans fittingly characterized Aelius Aristides: „Whoever wishes to see all the goods of the world, must either journey throughout the word or stay in Rome.”²²

It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe all products and their places of origin which filled the markets of Rome. So, at least, here is a concise overview of the goods offered to customers who could afford it. We start with products of Italy. The destruction of Carthage and devastation of its fertile latifundia made Italy the primary source of wine and olive oil. Italy produced also all kinds of vegetables. Meat, in early Rome more rarity than a daily fare, lost status of luxury and become part of daily diet for a growing number of city dwellers. This was possible by a huge scale of cattle breeding, which contributed to decline of prices for beef, cheese and leather. In these large farms labored hundreds, in some cases thousands of slaves.²³

A majority of goods came not only from various regions of the Empire, but also from distant countries such as Parthia, India and even China. From Africa was imported ivory, rare marbles, valuable woods, pearls, spices, obsidian, wild animals and slaves. Spain enriched emporiums of Rome with silver, gold, lead, tin, iron, cork, horses, oysters and other products. Germany offered furs, amber and slaves. From Greece was shipped silk, wines, honey, marble, emeralds and artworks of excellent quality. Merchants of Arabia sell spices, myrrh, cinnamon and precious stones. Egypt was a chief exporter of papyrus, corn, granite, basalt, alabaster and porphyry. From a remote India were imported spices, precious stones and elephants. One of the most valuable articles, equal in price to gold, was silk brought from China.²⁴ And list could go on and on. Quest for luxuries superseded bygone simplicity. The long peace, the safety of the seas, and the freedom of trade, had made Rome the entrepot for desired products and the delicacies of every land from the British Channel to the Ganges. According to S. Dill, besides priceless works of art imported were also rare building materials – „Palaces extending almost over the area of a town, were adorned with marbles from the quarries of Paros, Laconia, Phrygia, or Numidia, with gilded ceilings and curious panels changing with the courses of the banquet, with hundreds of tables of citrus-wood, resting on pillars of ivory, each costing a moderate fortune, with priceless bronzes and masterpieces of ancient plate.”²⁵

Because a majority of wares came to Rome from outside, trade and service economy were preponderant. Flow of merchandise poured into the city through ports of Ostia, Portus and emporium located beneath Aventine. Imported goods were placed in large store-houses (horrea), which specialized in various types of merchandise. For example, horrea chartaria had been used for storing papyrus and parchment; horrea candelaria was a warehouse where candles, torches and other flammable materials were stored. Some of them were huge – horrea Galbae, which stored tabernae used for transport of wares and oil, covered an area of three hectares. There were, also horrea which could be characterized as general stores, containing all sorts of goods. Variety and large quantity of merchandise had been imported to Rome by wholesale companies – magnarii, which had an important role in supplying city with corn, oil and wine. Shipping was controlled by domini navium, who operated fleets of merchant ships. Uninterrupted flow of merchandise to Rome was possible thanks to security of sea

22 DURANT, W. *The story...*, p. 328.

23 GRANT, M. *History of Rome...*, p. 163.

24 DURANT, W. *The story...*, pp. 328-329.

25 DILL, S. *Roman society...*, p. 66.

transport. Since Octavian, Romans could declare Mediterranean Sea to be truly the „Mare Nostrum“. Besides large entrepreneurs, economy of Rome was consisted mainly of thousands retail sellers, tavern-keepers, bakers and shop owners filling-up streets.

Nor manufacturers were absent in the city. Professions ranged from makers of goods for every-day use, such as the shoemakers (sutores), the carpenters and cabinet-makers (citarii), the metal workers (fabric ferrarii), the rope makers (restiones) to producers of luxurious articles – the jewelers (aurifices) and goldsmiths (brattarii inauratores). A significant share of city trade was carried also by vendors selling fruits, vegetables, meats and other foodstuffs.²⁶

Security and relative cheapness of travel enabled the rise of tourism of almost modern proportions. Intellectuals enamored of philosophy travelled to Athens or Rhodes. In Egypt pyramids and gigantic monuments cut of stone filled with awe Romans similarly as they are astonishing to tourists of our age.

To carry-on these complex and dynamic economical activities was possible thanks to an intricate financial system. According to W. Durant „...we must consider the Roman fiscal system one of the most successful and stable in history. For the two centuries asingle monetary standard was honored throughout Empire; and with this stable medium investment and trade flourished as never before in the memory of men.“²⁷

Despite occasional disruptions caused by wastefulness of some emperors, such as Nero´s irresponsible profligacy, several factors contributed to the growth of economy and rise of standard of living. The most important precondition for prosperity was peace. From Octavian Augustus till Marcus Aurelius, the Empire was protected against devastating incursions of barbarian hordes. Limes Romanus and Hadrian´s wall screened northern and western boundaries. Eastern and southern provinces were protected by a ring of legions. During the reign of the Emperor Trajan a new round of expansion was ushered, resulting in the greatest territorial expansion in Rome´s history. Gold from conquered Dacia and Parthia allowed Trajan to enact ambitious building activity. Almost non-existent language barriers and minimal interference of state also contributed to an economic prosperity. A significant tonic to economic enterprise was the sophisticated legal system, which even today is a valuable source and inspiration in the sphere of law.

Vibrant economic life required a sufficient inflow of money. From modest origins of money-changers, a complex system developed, capable of financing business enterprises throughout the Roman realm and beyond. Travelers´ checks, bills of exchange and interest bearing deposits created conditions for complex business activities not known again till the nineteenth century.

The economic boom, however, had a serious weakness – import and export of goods was not balanced. The City of Rome heavily contributed to the dominance of exports over imports. The high standard of living enjoyed by a sizeable segment of Rome´s populace was financed primarily by taxation of provinces. The privileged position of Rome could be maintained only till the Empire was strong enough to keep this unjust arrangement in place. Even during Rome´s supremacy a scarcity of precious metals, which were exported as a payment for luxuries from abroad, contributed to a depreciation of currency. Dearth of precious metals led to economic disruptions and was one of the reasons of Rome´s downfall.

A sizeable share of expenses constituted financing of a social welfare and entertainment provided for the populace of Rome. Famous expression „Panem et circenses“ became in the Era of Imperial Rome a reality.

26 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, pp. 178-179.

27 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, p. 331.

In regard to recipients of free assistance, J. Carcopino, citing Martial, estimated, „...that the number of persons receiving the public assistance rose in the course of the second century from 150 000 to 175 000 ... If we accept Martial's estimate of an average of five mouths per family, the total number must have been between 600 000 to 700 000... Directly or indirectly then, at least one third and possibly one half of the population of the city lived on public charity.“²⁸ Admitting that these figures are approximately correct, the conclusion must be that Rome during the Imperial Era was unquestionably the city with the most extensive social welfare in history.

But generosity of state was not the only benefit enjoyed by Romans. One of the pillars of social structure regulating relations between affluent and needy was a deeply rooted system of a mutual relationship between a patronus and a cliens. The moral duty of patron was to provide a protection for his clientes, offer him his hospitality, share his table with him and, in case of need, to provide client with food (sportula) or gift of money. The loftier position in the social pyramid, the more clientes patronus would have. Visits paid to patronus were done in the mornings. These events were regulated by a strict etiquette. In houses of very rich clients were admitted according to their social status – „...clientes were bound to wait their turn patiently, and this depended not on the order of their arrival but on their social status; the praetor came before the tribune, the eques²⁹ before the plain citizen, the freedman before the slave... Finally the client had to take great care in addressing his patron by title of dominus“.³⁰ Another important feature of this system was its universality. No matter how socially elevated was a Roman, it always had been someone to whom he was in a position of a cliens. A specific feature of this chain of dependency was that it was exclusively reserved for men. Whereas generally the relation patron – client had an economic function, in cases of well to do it was primarily a social and political relation.

It would seem that in such a generous welfare system, motivation to work would be rare. Surprisingly, it was no so. The driving force behind economic activities of Rome, as was already mentioned, became primarily a new class of people – freedmen. Increasing numbers and growing social significance of these people were a result of changes in status of slaves. With softening and more humane attitude to slaves, a practice of manumission, that is freeing slaves, became a common occasion and had been socially accepted. According to S. Dill, „in the establishment of the magistrates and priests; a considerable number even of the knights and Senate drew their origin from this source... In the reigns of Claudius and Nero especially, freedmen rose to the highest places in the imperial service“.³¹

The Emperor Claudius delegated to freedmen basically all business of the government. The state bureaucracy, not very different from modern governments, was divided into four departments – ministry of foreign affairs (ab epistulis) was headed by freedman Narcissus; treasury (ab fisco) administered freedman Pallas; department dealing with petitions (ab libellis) was led by freedman Callistus. Only office of attorney general (ab cognitionibus) was not run by a freedman. The results of this revolution were mixed – „The bureaucracy had improved administration and had made a thousand new openings for corruption. Narcissus and Pallas were excellent executives, who considered their salaries unequal to their merits. To make up a difference, they sold offices extorted bribes by threats and brought charges against men whose estates they wished to confiscate. They ended by being the richest individuals in all antiquity.“³²

28 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, p. 65.

29 Members of the equestrian class.

30 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, p. 172.

31 DILL, S. *Roman society...*, p. 101.

32 DURANT, W. *The story...*, p. 271.

Wealth paved a way for import of luxurious articles. Besides expensive rarities, Rome became a destination for countless objects of art. It is surprising that Romans, people so stern, became avid collectors of sublimed Greek art. The transition of Rome from Spartan simplicity to the most luxurious city in the antiquity went hand-in-hand with military conquests of Greece and Hellenized East. Roman generals were convinced that a legitimate reward of victory was the right to despoil conquered countries of their artistic treasures. An illustrative example of this approach is conquest of Corinth in 146 B. C. The same year when Carthage was utterly destroyed, Roman general Lucius Mummius Achaicus defeated the Achaean League, burned Corinth to the ground and brought all works of art treasures accumulated by this rich city throughout centuries to Rome. Rapacious generals and governors of provinces confiscated valuables, including objects of art everywhere.

However, not all artworks brought to Rome were stolen. Countless copies created by famous Greek sculptors which beautified forums, palaces and dwellings of well-to-do had been imported from Greece or made in Rome. Roman leaders became devoted collectors of the Greek art. Aristocratic Lucius Cornelius Sulla and champion of plebeians Gaius Julius Caesar were enamored in creations of Greek masters. Greek artists, encouraged by a growing interest in the Greek art, flocked into Rome. Caesar commissioned Greek sculptor Arcesilaus to create a statue of the Venus Genetrix. Caesar's love of beauty in various forms was well known. Suetonius, with a tinge of reproach, wrote: „*Pearls seem to have been the lure that prompted his invasion of Britain...and he was also a keen collector of gems, carvings, statues, and Old Masters.*”³³ But the most infatuated by Greek art was extravagant and in the final phase of his reign, clearly derailed Emperor Nero. However, in the case of Nero, it was not only interest of a typical art collector. He considered himself to be one of the most gifted artists ever lived. Writing, painting, music and theatrical performances – nothing was strange to this impresario on throne. He also loved a chariot-racing, a dangerous sport on which he participated personally. Suetonius reported that: „*He inaugurated the Neronia, a festival of competition in music, gymnastics, and horsemanship modeled on the Greek ones and held every five years.*”³⁴ As self-proclaimed artist, he was craving for recognition. Romans were astonished to see their Emperor play Hercules, Oidipus, Orestes and other mythical Greek heros on a stage. The Senate was horrified, but populace welcomed these performance and Nero's popularity actually increased. Humiliation of the Senate culminated when Nero coerced some of senators to join him in performances as actors, musicians, charioteers and gladiators. Paradoxically, Nero, one of the bloodiest murderers, who ordered killing his own mother, decreed a prohibition of gladiatorial combats to death.

Infatuated by the Greek life style, he decided to participate on the Olympic games in year 66 A. D. Decision to take an active part on horse races almost resulted in his death, when he was ejected from a chariot. Even though he gave up race before end, judges awarded him a crown of victory. According to Durant, „*Overcome with happiness when the crowd applauded him, he announced that thereafter not only Athens and Sparta, but all Greece should be free – i. e., exempt from any tribute to Rome.*”³⁵ The love between the Greeks and Emperor achieved idyllic proportions after Greek cities concentrated games to one year so Nero could participate on all of them. He competed in Pythian, Nemean and Isthmian games, singing, acting and took

33 SUETONIUS, G. T. *Twelve Caesars...*, p. 34.

34 SUETONIUS, G. T. *Twelve Caesars...*, p. 219.

35 DURANT, W. *The story...*, p. 283.

part on gymnastic disciplines. He perceived himself to be an artist even in the moment of his death. „*What an artist dies in me!*“³⁶ he allegedly uttered before he died.

An admirer of Greek culture was also the Emperor Publius Aelius Hadrian. Unlike Nero, Hadrian's reverence of Greek culture was predominantly focused upon philosophy. But Hadrian was cognizant also of Greek medicine and art. His love of a cradle of the Greek civilization – Athens, he demonstrated by three visits.³⁷ He supported Athens financially and simplified the archaic and almost unintelligible legal code, which impeded court proceedings in the city. In judgment of Hadrian's biographer Royston Lambert: „*No Emperor had done more for Hellas than Hadrian and none had been so ubiquitously visible...From year 128, it has been said, Hadrian belonged wholly to the east, putting all his creative energies into the revival and expansion of Hellenism.*“³⁸

However, he never let his artistic and intellectual inclinations to divert him from supreme duty as administrator of the Empire. On the contrary, despite his fill-Hellenism, for which he, as a young boy, was given the nickname „*Graeculus*“ – a little Greek, he was firstly the Roman Emperor and only then an admirer of the Greek culture and beneficiary of Greek cities. Hadrian was statesmen, and, when it was necessary a warrior, but also an enthusiastic builder. He enacted construction of several exceptional monuments. W. Durant supposed that „*Probably Hadrian himself designed the double-apsed temple to Venus and Roma which rose opposite to Colosseum... The temple was notable in several particulars: it was the largest in Rome; it had two cellars, one for each of the gods, who sat back to back on incommunicative thrones, and its vaulted roof of gold-plated bronze tiles was among the most brilliant sights of the city.*“³⁹ But, W. Durant opined that „*His most famous construction was the Pantheon-the best preserved building of the ancient world...The coffered dome, rising inward from the top of the walls, was the supreme triumph of Roman engineering. It was erected by pouring concrete into ribbed sections and letting the whole congeal into one solid mass.*“⁴⁰

Still, despite overwhelming influence of the Greek artistic cannon, idealizing humans to such a degree that they were more like gods than people, Roman respect for a realistic, occasionally even repulsive nature of life prevailed in a portrait sculpture of the Imperial Era. Romans, with their down-to-earth attitude felt no need to beautify their features and from portrait busts and effigies they are coming to us as they looked two millennia ago.

The durability of bronze and stone, materials which were used for statues, preserved, at least partially, artistic achievements of sculptors working in the Era of Emperors. This, unfortunately, was not so in the case of paintings. We know about highly esteemed painters such as Apelles, Polygnotus, Protogenes and Zeuxis, but paintings, with exception of frescos and mosaics, became victims of their fragility and time.

Specific, but of a high historic and artistic value were portraits on coins. M. Grant noted the triumph of realistic approach over sycophantic distortion in a portrait of Vespasian: „*Under Vespasian, portrait sculptors and coin engravers had to rise to a new challenge – an emperor who belonged to an unpretentious social class and wanted show it. Some artists, it is true, tried*

36 DURANT, W. *The story...*, p. 284.

37 LISSNER, Ivar. *The Caesars. Might and Madness*. New York : G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1958, p. 189.

38 LAMBERT, Royston. *Beloved and God. The story of Hadrian and Antinous*. Secaucus, New Jersey : Meadowland Books, 1988, 108-109.

39 DURANT, W. *The story...*, p. 421.

40 DURANT, W. *The story...*, s 421.

to iron out his rugged, whimsical features into something more orthodox. But others depicted them exactly as they were, or even added a touch of amusing caricature."⁴¹

Masterly examples of Roman realistic sculpture were „histories“ cut in stone. A true masterpiece of realistic carving to stone is a story of war with the Dacian King Decebalus, victoriously ended by the Emperor Trajan. A ruthless war with determined enemy of Rome is depicted on pillar erected as a memory of this bloody struggle. The Column of Trajan is a monumental memorial, rising above the Forum Traianum to height almost 30 meters, made of 17 marble cylinders 3,7 meters thick. The cylinders were carved from blocs of marble each weighting approximately 50 tons. The heavy pieces of stone were transferred from a distant island of Pharos to Rome. According to W. Durant „...they were shipped to port of Ostia, drawn against the current up to river, and were moved by rollers up the bank and through streets to their site."⁴²

Pillar is covered by 124 panels lined-up in a spiral form. The number of cylinders of which the pillar consists is impossible to determine exactly, their number vary from 19 to 23 marble blocks. A story of two campaigns led by Trajan into Dacia, in a chronological sequence of events, evolves into a drama richly illustrated by 2500 figures – Dacians and Romans clashed in a mortal combat. In front of observer individual events of this war are unfolding in such a detail and precision, that the Column of Trajan, besides its unique artistic value, is a supremely valuable source of information about the war with Decebal.

Similarly informative is the Arch of the Emperor Titus, commemorating the victory of Titus over the Jews. In his description of the monument M. Grant valued „...a vigorous interplay of light and shade (which) appears on a relief upon the inner face of the Arch of Titus of Rome, depicting soldiers carrying the spoils taken from the Jerusalem Temple in A. D. 70; the artist creates the illusion that the procession is viewed through an open frame, silhouetted against the sky."⁴³

Beside memorials, Rome was a home of numerous monumental, but at the same time highly practical buildings which enabled Romans to enjoy bathing. Not until twentieth century personal cleanness achieved such a high standard as in the Era of Empire. And, naturally, the highest concentration of spas was in the Rome. This was possible thanks to, on one side of an abundant supply of water brought to the city by several aqueducts, but also thanks to a generous support of emperors, who financed construction of these grandiose buildings.

The first public baths – thermae (hot water) appeared in Rome during the second century B. C. End of bloody civil wars and economic boom ushered by the Principate was a period of establishment of numerous public baths. In 33 B. C., when Agrippa took a census of baths, there were 170 of them in Rome.⁴⁴ In fourth century A. D., according to W. Durant, Romans could bathe in 856 public spas and 1352 swimming pools. Initially, thermae were privately owned, but fee was very low and entry was free for children. Agrippa made the first step to provide a free entry to all Romans – „In order to mark his term of office by a sensational act of generosity he undertook to pay entrance fees for the year of his aedileship. Not long after he founded thermae which bear his name, and these were to be free in perpetuity. This was a revolutionary principle in keeping with the paternal role which the empire had assumed toward the masses."⁴⁵

41 GRANT, M. *History of Rome...*, p. 305.

42 DURANT, W. *The story...*, p. 411.

43 GRANT, M. *History of Rome...*, p. 307.

44 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, p. 255.

45 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, p. 255.

Emperors considered a necessity to provide Romans with pleasure of free bathing in luxurious thermae as a means to foster their popularity. Nero built baths at the Campus Martius which had a capacity 1600 visitors. Near the Colosseum were located thermae built by Titus. Trajan, Caracalla, Alexander Severus, Diocletian and Constantine followed the suit. W. Durant described individual procedures, which had made the bathing a state of art: „*Passing to the baths proper, the citizen entered the tepidarium – in this case a warm-air room; thence he went on to the calidarium, or hot-air room; if he wished to perspire still more freely, he moved into the laconicum, and gasped in superheated steam. Then he took a warm bath and washed himself with a novelty learned from the Gauls – soap, made from tallow and the ashes of the beech or the elm. The bather progressed to the frigidarium and took a cold bath; he might also dip into piscine, or swimming pool. Then he had himself rubbed with some oil or ointment, usually made from the olive; this was not washed off, but merely scrapped off with a strigil and dried with a towel.*”⁴⁶

The size of thermae was imposing. Considering the congestion of Rome, it is almost incredible that so much space was given to the spas. For example, Caracallas bathing complex covered 11 hectares and Diocletian baths spread on 13 hectares. The expression „bathing complex” is justified because thermae did not serve to bathing only. The principal building, constructed in quadrilateral shape, was surrounded by a chain of shops. The internal space was filled-up by gymnasiums and massage rooms. Besides individual physical activities such as jumping, hurling the disc and running, also collective games were popular. Romans played with balls of different size. Popular was also a game reminding modern tennis, except that instead rockets, outstretched palms of hands were used. Visitors of spas could complement care for body with cultural activities. Guests had access to libraries and could borrow books – volumina, which could be read in reading rooms. There were also exedrae – rooms designed for discussion, listening arguments of philosophers and verses of poets. Visitors could enjoy music concerts and exhibitions organized in art galleries.

Thanks to a large number and size of spas, Romans could devote their time to bathing and socializing in these luxurious facilities. The result was that „... *the Roman people had contracted the habit of attending the baths daily and pending the greater part of their leisure there.*”⁴⁷

Thermae served both sexes without any form of discrimination. Women, who preferred to bathe without presence of men, could go to balneae, furnished exclusively for women. However, with increasing number of people who spent part of day in spas, free intermixing of undressed men and women inevitably led to a promiscuous behavior. To curb spreading of scandals, the Emperor Hadrian issued a decree ordering seclusion of sexes in the baths. Despite separation, thermae offered opportunities to indulge also in other pleasures than bathing only. As J. Carcopino ascertained, „*It is all too well established that there lurked under the stately porticoes vendors of food and drink and procures of both sexes; that many congregated there to overeat and drink and indulge other disreputable tastes.*”⁴⁸ However, in the final conclusion, he has words of praise on mass habit of bathing by Romans arguing that „... *the Romans learned to admire physical cleanness, useful sports, and culture; and thus for many generations they had kept decadence at bay.*”⁴⁹

Bathing was not the only pleasure accessible to people of Rome. Various forms of public entertainment could flourish because number of holidays was steadily increasing. In the

46 DURANT, W. *The story...*, p. 375.

47 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, p. 257.

48 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, p. 263.

49 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, p. 263.

second half of the fourth century A.D. the total number of holidays amounted to 175. During *dies fasti* business activities could be conducted without hindrance. *Dies nefasti*, however, were excluded from commercial activities and selected as *feriae* – public holidays or *ludi* – public games. The origin of the oldest public games – *Ludi Romani* has its origin in the fourth century B. C., a more that a century later were founded *Ludi Plebei*, still of later date were established *Ludi Apollinares*, *Ludi Cereales*, *Ludi Megalenses* and *Ludi Florales* consecrated to various deities. The religious devotion, which characterized *ludi* in the Era of the Republic receded and festivals became more secular and focused on entertainment.

With emergence of powerful personalities at the close of the Republic, a new type of public games had been established. Lucius Cornelius Sulla started a tradition of *ludi* celebrated in honor of his victories – *Ludi Victoriae Sullanae*. Julius Caesar followed by establishing *Ludi Victoriae Caesaris*. Similarly, Octavian Augustus founded *Ludi Fortunae Reducis* and his spouse Livia added *Ludi Palatini*. J. Carcopino ascertained that already „...at the time of Claudius the Roman calendar contained 159 days expressly marked as holidays, of which 93 were devoted to games given at public expense.“⁵⁰ S. Dill calculated growing number of days reserved for public games during centuries after Augustus: „The number of days which were annually given up to games and spectacle at Rome rose from 66 in the reign of Augustus to 135 in the reign of M. Aurelius, and to 175, or more, in the fourth century.“⁵¹ So many days reserved for games allowed, actually required, a variety of spectacles capable to attract and amuse masses.

From all sorts of entertainment, only a modest degree of popularity attracted theatres. In the Imperial Era theatres became a playground of mimes. The intricacy of plot and scenery receded to a simpler taste of crowd appreciating more erotically toned mimicry. W. Durant summed-up this development: „Tired of dramas in ancient and pompous verse, Rome welcomed the new art, thrilled to the grace and skill of the actors, enjoyed the gorgeousness of their costumes, the splendor or humor of their masks...“⁵²

Popular became plays performed by – mime (*mimus*). Mimes, unlike actors in the classic plays, had no masks and stories of plays reflected a real life in somewhat farcical fashion. Some of mimes, with the aim to attract spectators, sank into a lewdness and cruelty. Because twisted portraiture of life and exhibitions of bloody scenes, Carcopino's have a serious reservations to this type of entertainment: „As the mime reached the height of its achievement, it drove humanity as well as art off the Roman stage. It plumbed the depths of a perversion which had conquered the masses of the capital.“⁵³

Precursor of our modern sport events were athletic competitions of the traditional Greek disciplines – throwing of discus, running, wrestling and boxing. Athletic disciplines were the Greek invention and even in Rome a majority of competitors were Greeks. The most ruthless was boxing. Pugilists, catering to Roman taste for merciless fight, used gloves reinforced with iron rings. These fights were bloody and frequently ended with serious injuries.

A truly adrenaline sport, capable of ejecting spectators from their seats, were the horse races. There were two types of these exciting competitions – either races of horses with jockeys, or chariots driven by two, three or four horses in line. Competitive spirit was enhanced by establishment of clubs of jockeys and charioteers wearing distinctive colors – red, blue, green and white. Each club had enthusiastic fans. Thrill was amplified by placing bets, frequently of exorbitant sums.

50 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, p. 205.

51 DILL, S. *Roman society...*, p. 234.

52 DURANT, W. *The story...*, pp. 378-379.

53 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, p. 231.

A history of horse racing spanned centuries before the Imperial Era. In year 221 B. C. censor Flaminius Nepos built the Circus Flaminius near site where Palazzo Caetani stays today. Its dimensions were truly imposing – 400 meters long and 260 meters wide. Smaller hippodrome – the Circus Gai built by the Emperor Caligula on the site of Vatican, measured 180 by 90 meters. A veritable wonder of architecture was the Circus Maximus, constructed between the Palatine and the Aventine. The gigantic oval measuring 600 by 200 meters was delineated by three arcades superimposed in the same way like arcades of the Colosseum. In the middle of the racing arena was a narrow island – spine (spina) approximately three hundred meters long, embellished by statues. At each end of the spina were placed circular pillars (metae), which marked finishing line.⁵⁴ Octavian Augustus had no qualms to take from Egypt the obelisk of Rameses II and, after arduous journey to Rome, placed it in the centre of the Circus Maximus. The lowest tier of seats, reserved to the Roman elite, was of marble, higher strata was filled with wooden seats and the highest platform was for standing only. According to the Regionaria of fourth century, the Circus Maximus could accommodate an incredible number of 385 000 spectators.⁵⁵

The signal to start a race was given by the presiding praetor or the aedilis who tossed a white napkin into the area. The number of races, each of seven laps, gradually increased and during the Principate there were usually a dozen a day.⁵⁶

Races were extremely dangerous, but generous rewards of money and celebrity status was a winners reward. Jockeys and charioteers enjoyed popularity comparable to the top sportmen of today. Some of them won races more than thousand times. According to W. Durant, „*At home, in school, at lectures, in the forums, half the talk was about favorite jockeys and charioteers; their pictures were everywhere, their victories were announced in the Acta Diurna, some of them made great fortunes, some had statues raised to them in public squares.*”⁵⁷ If we can believe to contemporary records, several jockeys were exceptionally successful. A charioteer named Scopus allegedly had been victorious over two thousand times, Pompeius Musclosus three and half thousand times. These victories made them fabulously rich. Diocles who, after having competed 4257 times and won the 1462 victories, had the wisdom to retire from the arena in 150 A. D. with a fortune of 35 million sesterces.⁵⁸ However, excitement of races, sweet feeling of triumph and rich financial reward came at price. Determination to snatch a victory, no matter what, resulted frequently in horrifying accidents. Few of charioteers lived long enough to celebrate thirtieth birthday.

J. Carcopino characterized the races which so strongly roused emotions of Romans, as a substitute to political struggles of the Republic: „*The excitement which people had sought in politics they sought now in the races. Their stakes were laid no longer in the Forum but in the circus, whose „factions” had become a substitute for the ancient political parties. This mania was unquestionably the symbol of a moral decline.*”⁵⁹

On the scale of popularity, second to none were gladiatorial games. This immensely popular type of entertainment is to us unquestionably the most controversial in regard to at least rudimental standards of humanity. For Romans, however, games were an integral part of

54 DURANT, W. *The story...*, p. 383.

55 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, pp. 214-215.

56 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, p. 215.

57 Acta Diurna (Daily Doings) were a sort of newspapers. It originated as a source of news by decision of Gaius Julius Caesar to inform Romans about proceedings in Senate via posting reports on walls. DURANT, W. *The story...*, p. 384.

58 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, p. 219.

59 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, p. 221.

life style and were so popular that emperors were willing to spare no money to finance them. Gladiator games were not an invention of the Imperial Era. Already in the second century B. C. games were popular in Rome. Growing corruption during the final decades of the Republic found an outlet in organizing gladiator games by rich individuals as a way to gain popularity. The Senate tried to stop this controversial tactic by excluding from canvassing for public office any person who financed this type of spectacles. However, with fading power of the Senate, this decree became increasingly ignored.

Traditionally, the combats of gladiators were carried on in temporary structures erected on the Forum and after games ended they were dismantled. The construction of the first permanent amphitheater financed a friend of Octavian Augustus, C. Statilius in 29 B. C. The amphitheater became a victim of destructive fire which erupted in 64 A. D.

Reflecting the need for a new amphitheater, the Emperor Vespasian initiated construction of building which became one of the landmarks of Rome for millennia to come. Vespasian died during construction and amphitheater was finished by his son Titus. We know this monumental edifice as the Colosseum. There is no question that this name is well deserved, but originally it was called the Flavian Amphitheater. The name Colosseum gained after the monumental statue of Nero, which stood nearby. According M. Grant, *„...this amphitheater, the earliest in the city to be built completely of stone, remains, for all its horrific purpose, one of the most marvelous buildings in the world.“*⁶⁰

The Colosseum, constructed almost two thousand years ago, withstood vicissitudes of history, incursions of barbarian hordes and rapaciousness of Renaissance nobles, who used amphitheatre as a quarry.

The Flavian Amphitheatre could not accommodate as many spectators as the Circus Maximus, in this type of building it would be impossible, but nevertheless 45 000 persons could be seated there and in addition 5000 visitors could watch games if they were contended to stay. Technically, the Colosseum was the most complex and advanced building in the whole Rome and most likely in the whole Empire.

The lasting durability of building was achieved by use of hard travertine cut from quarries located in Tivoli. To facilitate transport of heavy blocks, a special road was built. The Colosseum has an oval shape measuring 188 by 156 meters. Its three superimposed tiers of arcades and fourth tier made by a solid wall, had a total height of 57 meters. The first row of marble seats, situated four meters above arena, was protected by a bronze balustrade. These places were reserved for privileged visitors. The division of seats was strictly in observance of a social status of spectators. The Emperors and their suites were seated at the center of one of the longer sites, directly opposite to the section reserved for state dignitaries and persons who financially contributed to organization of games. Directly above protective wall were seats of senators. Above the Roman elite, divided into three segments, were sits accessible to a general public. The Colosseum had no roof, but combatants and spectators were sheltered by a gigantic awning (velaria). In the underground chambers were located, where animals had been kept. A quick transport to the fighting arena was provided by elevators. The fighting arena, measuring 86 by 54 meters, was a wooden floor covered by a layer of sand.

Games carried out in the Colosseum were cruel, sadistic and nerve-wrecking. However, they were not more perverted than public executions frequently accompanied with use of hideous torture or burning alive, which were common in the Middle Ages. The main difference is only a spectacular nature of bloody entertainment, in which Romans found such a deplorable infatuation.

60 GRANT, M. *History of Rome...*, p. 317.

Romans deflected contemporary criticism with an argument that gladiators were content with their fate. Actually, some men became gladiators voluntarily. Combat in the arena to death was the ultimate adrenaline experience and some gladiators were depended on it. There were other motives to fight. Exceptionally good fighter could become a hero of crowds and gain fame, wealth and freedom. That the lure of combat was real, testified Suetonius – „*Even Roman knights sometimes took part in stage-plays and gladiatorial shows until a Senatorial decree put an end to the practice.*“⁶¹

Gladiators were professionals, highly specialized fighters. To train a gladiator took a long time and it was expensive. Special schools (ludus gladiatorius), owned by lanistae were managed in a similar way like training camps for elite soldiers. Discipline was enforced ruthlessly, they were punished for the slightest offence, but regardless of their origin, they had been equal to each other, collectively created familia gladiatoria and only distinction was their fighting skills. Each gladiator was carefully evaluated in regard to his ability to excel in particular type of combat. There were the „Samnites“ fighting with shield (scutum) and sword (spatha), the „Thracians“ who went into combat armed with round shield (parma) and dagger (sica), the „Retiarii“ whose weapons were a net and a trident. Gladiators trained to fight wild animals were called bestiarii. S. Dill noted the controversial status of gladiators: „*The gladiator had, indeed, to submit to fearful perils and a cruel discipline...Yet the profession must have had some powerful attractions. Some of the emperors, Titus and Hadrian, themselves took a pleasure in the gladiatorial exercises. Commodus, as if to confirm the scandal about his parentage,*⁶² *actually descended into the arena, and imperial example was followed by men of high rank...The splendor of the arms, the ostentatious pomp of the scene of combat, the applause of thousand of spectators on the crowded benches, the fascination of danger, all this invested the cruel craft with a false glory.*“⁶³

Drama of deadly fights had a theatrical prelude. Combats were preceded by a march of gladiators, who paraded around arena, dressed in festive purple robes – chlamys. Approaching to emperor's lodge, they raised right hand as a sign of homage and uttered infamous salute – „*Ave Imperator, morituri te salutant!*“ After festive march of gladiators was over, weapons undergo a careful inspection. Pairs of combatants were usually chosen by lot, but occasionally duelists were fighting using different weapons to made combat more spectacular. A signal to commence fight was given by shrill sound of trumpets and horns. As in horse races, excitement of spectators was exacerbated by betting. Defeated gladiator, if he was not killed outright or mortally wounded, could ask for mercy – he outstretched his left hand in symbolic request for mercy. If he fought bravely and gained sympathy of the public, crowd raised their fingers with cry „Mitte!“ – asking for mercy for defeated gladiator. The decision of crowd was usually confirmed by the emperor. If, however, for some reason spectators decided that defeated gladiator deserved to die, they cried „lugula!“ and emperor sealed his fate by turning his thumb down.

In comparison to gladiators, in a much worse situation were condemned criminals, prisoners of war, or Christians. This last group of people refused to give homage, even symbolically, to the Gods of Rome and was recurrently exposed to cruel punishments. Nero condemned Christians, who were accused of starting a great conflagration which almost destroyed Rome, to sadistic tortures. Tacitus, who by no means was a friend of Christians, criticized Nero's conduct on ground of his unspeakable cruelty: „*First, Nero had self-acknowledged Christians*

61 SUETONIUS, G. T. *Twelve Caesars...*, p. 79.

62 Rumors were spreading throughout Rome that his true father was a gladiator.

63 DILL, S. *Roman society...*, p. 242.

arrested. Then, on their information, large numbers of others were condemned – not so much for incendiarism as for their anti-social tendencies. Their deaths were made farcical. Dressed in wild animal's skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight. Nero provided his gardens for the spectacle, and exhibited displays in the Circus...⁶⁴

To amuse and to calm down excited crowds, deadly combats were interspersed by performances of trained animals. J. Carcopino, citing antic historians Pliny the Elder and Martial, described these performances as the shows were death, exceptionally, was not omnipresent: „...teams of panthers were obediently drawing chariots; lions released from their jaws a live hare they had caught; elephants were gravely kneeling before the imperial box or traced Latin phrases in the sand with their trunks.“⁶⁵

The most spectacular were the sham battles of war-ships fought of in the arena of the Colosseum or other places, which were transformed into artificial lakes. These popular shows initiated Gaius Julius Caesar, who ordered to excavate a basin on the outskirts of city, suitable for imitation of sea fight. His son-in law, Octavian Augustus, followed steps of his adoptive father. Augustus celebrated the dedication of the Mars the Avenger temple by staging a replica of the battle of Salamis on the artificial lake, measuring 1800 by 1200 feet.⁶⁶

According to Suetonius, Emperor Claudius „Before allowing the water to escape from the Fucine Lake, he arranged to have asham sea-fight on it... Twelve Rhodian triremes then engaged twelve Sicilian ones; the signal for the fight being given by a mechanical silver Triton, which emerged from the Lake bottom and blew a conch.“⁶⁷ A tragic episode of the Greek history – commencement of the Peloponesian War – was commemorated in a naval battle between the Corinthians and Corcyreans as a part of dedication of the Colosseum by the Emperor Titus.

An overwhelming popularity of gladiatorial games made criticism of these bloody spectacles not an easy task. Even men like Tacitus, who denounced immorality of emperors and depravity of the Roman society, consented to killings in arena. Cicero, though criticized spiritual debasement resulting from carnage, judged mortal combats of gladiators as an event which prepared men against suffering and death. Only Seneca unequivocally condemned senseless killing, expressing a shock, that „Man, a sacred thing to man, is killed for sport and merriment.“⁶⁸

Despite all cruelty and disregard for life, traditional Roman religion not only accepted carnage, but incorporated it into its system. „Religion accepted the games“, wrote Will Durant, „as proper form of religious celebration and inaugurated them with solemn processions. The Vestal Virgins and the priests occupied seats of honor in the theaters, at the circus and before the arena. The emperor who presided was the high priest of the state religion.“⁶⁹

The incorporation of animal and human sacrifices was deeply rooted in the past. In Italy already Etruscans believed that sacrifice of prisoners of war pleases the gods. For Romans, gladiatorial games and religion did not constituted a moral dilemma. In religious concept of Romans, the moral element did not occupy such an important role as in the monotheistic religions. According to M. Grant, „Roman religion was based on mutual trustfulness (fides) between the divine powers or gods, on the one hand and men and women on the other. The trust

64 TACITUS, C. *The Annals...*, p. 365.

65 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, p. 238.

66 DURANT, W. *The story...*, p. 383.

67 SUETONIUS, G. T. *Twelve Caesars...*, p. 199.

68 DURANT, W. *The story...*, p. 387.

69 DURANT, W. *The story...*, p. 388.

accorded by the gods, and their benevolence... could be secured by meticulous ritual and not so much, as more recent religions would maintain, by good moral behavior, since for centuries there was no very prominent moral element in Roman religion."⁷⁰

A weak point in the state religion was an absence of emotional interconnection between people and gods – „Roman religion froze in the impulses of faith by its coldness and its prosaic utilitarianism“, wrote J. Carcopino.⁷¹ This was evident especially in Rome. Unlike cities in provinces and settlements located in country-side, Rome in the Imperial Era became a state within a state – a gigantic welfare establishment, which provided conditions for a parasitic life style of a large segment of population. The fusion of religious rites and leisure preserved the state religion, but for many Romans religious ceremonies had only a decorative purpose. Already during the reign of Augustus, a class of educated elite emerged with openly skeptical attitude to religion of their fathers. According to W. Durant, „The rich youths who went to Athens, Alexandria, and Rhodes for higher education found no sustenance there for the Roman creed. Greek poets made fun of the Roman pantheon and Roman poets leaped to imitate them.“⁷² To Ovid, a poet of free love and unrestricted pleasure, religion was only a collection of made-up stories presenting a series of concocted fables about gods as a reality.

Augustus, with his far-reaching insight, was well aware of a creeping moral decay threatening the very foundations of the Roman Empire. He did what he could to reinvigorate old faith, morality and patriotism, but to no avail. Illustrative example of his failure was a behavior of his own grand daughter Julia, who, together with a coterie of her cronies, held in contempt grandfathers endeavors to protect Rome from a moral debasement.

Authority of traditional religion was further compromised by behavior of incompetent and derailed emperors. Emperors like Caligula and Nero, though formally observed traditional rituals, lived scandalously and contributed significantly to a loss of authority of the state religion.

Diminishing sanctity of the Roman gods was partly superseded by superstition and astrology. Even well educated Augustus, according to Suetonius, „...have been scared of thunder and lightning, against which he always carried a piece of seal-skin as an amulet...“⁷³

Astrology became a revered science, believed to be capable of disclosing future. Historians Suetonius, Tacitus and Dio Cassius recorded predictions derived by seers from stars. The worries and hopes of people, including emperors, were roused by prophecies. Nero, despite his contempt of regular religion, was not immune to ominous predictions. Appearance of a comet at the close of his reign, explained his astrologer Balbillus as a sign of danger to the Emperors life. Otho reached for imperial throne on the base of prediction made by astrologer Seleucus. S. Dill opined that „The emperors of Flavian dynasty...were not less devoted to Eastern superstitions that any of their predecessors“, and „Vespasian... consulted the oracle on Mount Carmel, and obeyed the vision vouchsafed in the temple of Serapis. His son Titus... consulted foreign oracles, worshipped in Egyptian temples and was a firm believer in the science of the stars“.⁷⁴

In truth, oracles were not new in Rome. The „art“ of prediction of future was practiced in Rome since time immemorial. But a new feature in the business of future predictions was an increasing popularity of foreign soothsayers and their exotic ways to determine occurrence of

70 GRANT, M. *History of Rome...*, p. 19.

71 CARCOPINO, J. *Daily life...*, p. 122.

72 DURANT, W. *The story...*, p. 388.

73 SUETONIUS, G. T. *Twelve Caesars...*, p. 103.

74 DILL, S. *Roman society...*, p. 449.

future events. For people prediction of their fate was much more important than ceremonies of the traditional religion, which, as everything else in the Imperial Rome, was weakened by profound changes in composition of society. Unlike provinces, this transformation was most pronounced in Rome. Rome in the Era of Emperors was the most cosmopolitan metropolis in antiquity. If Scipio Africanus would walk streets of Hadrian's Rome, he would have difficulty to recognize his city. It was not only size of metropolis and maze of temples, baths and other monumental buildings, but primarily it would be masses of people clearly of foreign origin, whom he would meet everywhere. Besides thousands of slaves who flooded the Rome after the Punic Wars, an avalanche of immigrants from all parts of the Empire flocked to the capital looking for opportunities to improve their lives. One of the most numerous groups of incomers was the Greeks. Greek sculptors, painters and creators of luxurious artworks made of precious metals which found appreciation among Rome's rich, domiciled in Rome. No less appreciating were Greek teachers, doctors and philosophers. Many of these educated newcomers had either tepid attitude to the traditional religion or were declared atheists. The social significance of Greeks is documented by a fact that the Greek language was used in streets of Rome on equal terms with the Latin. According to W. Durant, „*Nearly all the early Christians in Rome spoke Greek; so did the Syrians, the Egyptians and the Jews.*“⁷⁵

Profoundly different was a community of Jews. The first major influx of Jews into Rome was involuntary – they were brought as war captives by Pompey in 63 B. C. Unlike Greeks, Jews formed a close-knit society, staying aloof from the rest of population. Strict observance of their religious duties, reluctance to share with Romans joy of public bathing and thrill of bloody gladiatorial games and their emphasis upon family circle made them a distinctive community. They shunned the Greek lore and the Greek art celebrating nudity was repulsive to them. Spiritual life was centered at synagogues, which complemented architectural diversity of Rome. Consequently, they were disliked and became frequently a target of the hostile acts. Their refusal of all religions as a idolatry, including the Roman Pantheon, was criticized and despised by Romans. Aloofness, however, did not hamper ability of Jews to actively participate on economic life of city. Time and energy spared by abstemious style of life spent on trade and handicraft.

Their situation in Rome was changing in dependence on capriciousness of emperors. Whereas Caesar and Augustus protected them, Tiberius expelled Jews from Rome, but he revoked his order and allowed them to return. Claudius confirmed their right to live by their own laws. Domitian again condemned Jews to exile and Nerva again brought them back and reinstated their civic rights. With changing fortunes, Jews survived in Rome to witness her downfall. W. Durant summarized composition of this motley structure of Roman population: „*If we add to the Greeks, the Syrians, the Egyptians, and the Jews some Numidians, Nubians, and Ethiopians from Africa; a few Arabs, Parthians, Cappadocians, Armenians, Phrygians, and Bythinians from Asia; powerful „barbarians“ from Dalmacia, Thrace, Dacia, and Germany; mustachioned nobles from Gaul, poets and peasants from Spain, and „tattooed“ savages from Britain – we get an ethnic picture of a very heterogeneous and cosmopolitan Rome.*“⁷⁶ No wonder, that Suetonius, with revulsion of a haughty Roman aristocrat called Rome „*The cesspool of the world.*“⁷⁷

This multitude, coming from all over world, inevitably contributed to a spiritual complexity of Roman society. New religious concepts were coming from East bringing fresh impulses

75 DURANT, W. *The story...*, p. 365.

76 DURANT, W. *The story...*, p. 367.

77 DURANT, W. *The story...*, p. 367.

and novel ideas into city. Emotions and believe in after-life, which occupied only secondary place in the traditional religion, enchanted many Romans. S. Dill pointed to the emotional power of deity Magna Mater, which started an invasion of religious cults coming from the East: „*The earliest invader from the East of the sober decorum of old Roman religion, and almost the last to succumb, was the Magna Mater of Pessinus. There is no pagan cult which S. Augustine, and many of the Fathers before him, assailed with such indignant contempt as hers.*”⁷⁸ The cult of the Magna Mater can be accounted for a wave of new religious believes which became popular in Imperial Rome. It was an old religion. But with Vespasian coming to power the Magna Mater gained unprecedented popularity. Claudius, aware of significance of the Magna Mater followers, removed the last restrictions limiting the freedom of worshippers.

A great degree of attraction, even though with mixed attitude on part of many Romans, enjoyed a cult of goddess Cybele. According to S. Dill, „*The worship of Cybele, coming from the same regions as the Trojan ancestors of Rome, was at first a patrician cult. Members of the proudest houses bore a part in welcoming her to a place in the Roman Pantheon... By a curious contradiction of sentiment, people were fascinated by a ritual, while they despised the celebrants.*”⁷⁹

Devoted followers attracted also a cult of Isis, an Egyptian goddess of fertility, motherhood and trade. Resistance of emperors to this cult was eventually broken. Caligula not only provided a state funds to finance of building a majestic temple consecrated to Isis in the Field of Mars, but, „*... with shaven head, walked humbly behind the priests, holding reverently in his arms the statue of Anubis, the Egyptian monkey god.*”⁸⁰

These religious cults, in sharp contrast to the traditional Roman religion, utilized to maximal degree their power to stir-up emotions and need for unification with supernatural being. They were able to bring forth submerged impulses leading to surrender and devotion. Ability of these religions to subvert rational side of human being filled many Romans with revulsion and hate. Juvenal denounced mercilessly fraudulent and deceiving character of oriental religions which, in his conviction, were spiritually polluting Rome.

Emperor Tiberius, similarly convinced that spiritual invasion from East was detrimental to Rome, „*... abolished foreign cults at Rome, particularly the Egyptian and Jewish, forcing all citizens who had embraced these superstitious faiths to burn their religious vestments and other accessories.*”⁸¹

A Roman enchanted of mysticism, could choose from an array of other exotic religious – from southern Italy, spread worship of Pythagoras with its doctrine of reincarnation. Many Roman soldiers stationed at eastern boundaries of Empire became devotees of the Parthian god Mithras – a symbol of light in an eternal struggle of Good against Evil.

A triumphant march of exotic eastern religious cults culminated during the reign of Varius Avitus „the creative god” – Elagabalus. A young priest of eastern deity – Baal, by decision of Roman soldiers stationed in Syria, became an emperor and ushered one of the most quixotic episodes in Rome’s history. He was fourteen years old and his elevation to the throne was secured by his mother and grandmother, who influenced decision of Syrian soldiers with gold.

Elagabalus, however, was a ruler only in name. According to W. Durant, „*Pleasure, not Baal was his god, and he was resolved to worship it in all its genders and forms.*”⁸² The Praetorian Guard eventually ended grotesque reign of this oriental quasi god. Elagabalus was murdered

78 DILL, S. *Roman society...*, p. 547.

79 DILL, S. *Roman society...*, p. 549.

80 DURANT, W. *The story...*, p. 390.

81 SUETONIUS, G. T. *Twelve Caesars...*, p. 132.

82 DURANT, W. *The story...*, p. 624.

in year 222 A. D. According to J. Burckhardt, four years of Elagabalus rule were filled-up with „*The incredible voluptuousness, the Asiatic pomp of idolatry, the thoughtless surrender to the pleasures of the moment...*“ In opinion of historian Jacob Burckhardt, „*His destruction arose from an awakened sense of shame in the soldiers.*“⁸³

By its radical transformation of existing values and gradual, but inexorably increasing popularity, was gaining a position of prominence the Christianity. Among all religious believes existing parallel to the traditional religion, it was only the Jewish and the Christian religion, which categorically refused to accept a divine nature of Roman deities. Adherents of both religions paid a price for their non-conforming approach. However, unlike inwardly based Jewish religion, Christianity was constantly gaining new members. The upper strata of Roman society and a large segment of populace registered this trend with a growing irritation. Initial tolerance gave a way to such a degree of hostility as was never exhibited against any other religion in the past. As was already mentioned, Nero used the negative sentiments of many Romans to Christians to accuse them of starting fire which almost destroyed Rome. Christians, despite a lack proof of their guilt became collectively „public enemies“ and were inhumanly tortured and killed.

A sort of total war erupted between Christians and Roman state – „*To a Roman his religion was part of the structure and ceremony of government, and his morality culminated in patriotism; to a Christian his religion was something apart from and superior to political society; his highest allegiance belonged not to Caesar but to Christ.*“⁸⁴ Pacifism and detachment from „earthly“ matters became other reason to persecute Christians from state authorities.

The fate of Christians largely depended on intensity of hate or on a degree of tolerance of individual emperors. After Nero, during whose reign open adherence to Christian belief was a capital offence, suppression of Christians run an uneven course. The Emperor Domitian initially exiled Christians from Rome, but reversed his decision and allowed them to return. Trajan and especially Hadrian had no sympathy for Christians but neither treated them with a sadistic rabid hate. The Emperor Aurelius, strongly convinced of necessity to uphold traditional religion, renewed prosecution of Christians. Commodus, careless of the fate of Roman religion vis-à-vis to the Christian challenge, persecution of Christians stopped. Septimius Severus again initiated suppression. Some of the following emperors, such as Diocletian, intensified the prosecution of Christians with mercilessness, which drove them underground. However, suffering only reinforced the determination of Christians to pay even a highest price, for their creed.

The significance of Christianity summed-up historian Edward Gibbon: „*A candid but rational inquiry into the progress and establishment of Christianity may be considered as a very essential part of the history of Roman empire ... a pure and humble religion gently insinuated itself into the minds of men, grew up in silence and obscurity, derived new vigor from opposition, and finally erected the triumphal banner of the Cross on the ruins of the Capitol.*“⁸⁵

It is no overstatement that there was no a metropolis in the ancient history of Europe, like the City of Rome. The „Eternal City“, during the Era of Emperors commanded admiration, love and hate. It became not only master of Italy but also governed lands far beyond. Roman engineering mastery transformed landscapes, brought plentiful supplies of water not only to Rome, but the cities throughout Empire and covered it by a network of excellent roads. Thanks to countless sources, we know how lived, worked and spent their leisure time Romans in

83 BURCKHARDT, Jacob. *The age of Constantine the Great*. New York : Dorset Press, 1989, p. 24.

84 DURANT, W. *The story...*, p. 647.

85 GIBBON, E. *The decline and fall...*, p. 143.

a minute detail. We know their vices, their reckless way of life, partly possible by exploitation of masses of people living outside of the Capital. But, no matter what is our judgment, we can not ignore a majestic splendor of ancient Rome, which bequeathed to us treasures of its ancient glory.

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