

David Cortez

Prof. Brandon Essary-Programma Ponte 2008

-Discuss Roman foundations (cultural, linguistic, political) that continue to impact contemporary life in Italy.

Many aspects of modern Italian life have their roots in the ancient Roman civilization. Political processes followed in modern times have similarities to those in ancient times. In ancient Rome, a big part of the economy was agriculture, as is in Modern Italy. The language of ancient Rome, Latin, is the foundation of Italy's language (as well as others). The transformation of the Roman Empire into the Italian state was a process that took over 2,000 years but was very gradual over time. Changes were gradual and adaptation of modern to ancient was a concept which Ancient Romans and Renaissance men were familiar with (especially in reusing building materials). The fundamental institutions and customs of the ancient Romans continue to have a great impact on contemporary life in Italy.

The ancient Roman civilization was one that was greatly impacted by the Greek and Etruscan civilizations but the Roman civilizations bore unique characteristics that set it aside from its contemporaries. Rome was founded by an agricultural group that mainly had an interest in farming. Agriculture was a means of trade and largely became a source of wealth and major player in the economy. Similarly, a large part of the Italian economy is based on agriculture (after industry and services). Italy prides itself of small trade between regions and an interdependence between its regions for high quality produce and dairy products such as grains, vegetables, milk, cheeses, wines etc. In ancient Rome there were three meals a day; a simple breakfast (ientaculum), a small lunch (prandium) and

dinner (*cena*). The latter was served late in the evening and was composed of three courses; an appetizer (*gustatio*), main course (*primae mensae*), dessert (*secundae mensae*) and a round of drinks (*commisatio*). Modern Italians follow a very similar ritual in which the last meal is extended and becomes a very enjoyable social event.

The arts were very important in Roman society as it served as entertainment for the rich but also as a sort of social marker of accomplishments. Roman entertainment was made up of largely public events, open to the public at no charge in large venues such as the Colosseum. Public baths such as the Baths of Caracalla gave Romans an opportunity to enjoy a bath in a communal area free of charge. Entertainment was used as a form of right that rulers left for people.

The ancient Romans spoke Latin and through expansion, it spread to the Mediterranean and all over the Empire. Latin evolved into such languages as French, Italian, Romanian, Spanish and Portuguese. In that sense, the Roman foundation of language has not only impacted Modern Italian society but the entire world. Likewise, the gradual evolution of language made the transformation of an ancient civilization to modern state easier. For example the names of many cities all over Italy have Latin roots: Brindisi (*Brindisium*), Arezzo (*Arretium*), Florence (*Florentia*), Ariminum (*Rimini*), Bologna (*Bononia*), Genua (*Genoa*), etc. The rapport between several cities on the Italian Peninsula was already established and assimilation into the Roman culture was made easy through common names and use of a common area of land.

In addition to the linguistic aspect of life, the Roman civilization made a significant contribution to the world in conceptualizing a calendar (*kalendae*) composed of seven days which were: *Luna dies* (day of the moon-Monday), *Martis dies* (*Giorno di*

Marte), Mercurii dies (giorno di Mercurio), Jovis dies (Giorno di Giove), Veneris dies (Giorno di Venere), Saturni dies (Giorno di Saturno) and Solis dies (Giorno del Sole). The ancient Romans also contributed 10 months to the years: Martius (Marte-Mars-March); Aprilis (Aprire-Open-April); Maius (Maia, Mother of Mercury-May); Iunius (Giunone-Juno-June); Quintilis (Quinto mese, 5th Month); Iulius (Giunone, July); Augustus (Augusto, August); September (septem imber- Sette Pioggia); October (otto imber- Otto Pioggia); November (Nove Imber); December (Dieci imber); later on Januarius (dedicated to Giano, January); and Febrarius (month of purification, February). This functional and interesting contribution accomplishes two things: 1. Provides a system of time for the Romans which identifies seasons; 2. The month of Febrarius was a month of Purification to the Romans, In Catholicism the month of February signifies the beginning of Lent (Purification); just one segway between ancient Roman civilization.

The political structure of ancient Rome set a strong foundation for future political institutions in Italy and all Western Civilization. At first, Rome operated as a monarchy with Romulus serving as the first of seven kings then it developed into a democratic oligarchy then later to a modern form of democracy which incorporated a vast number of individuals serving on the senate (senato) and Comizi Centuriati (Committee made of Nobility and Non Nobility). Rome was also the first of all civilizations to carry out a census of all its citizens, which allowed the general population to be identified and participate in war according to their social class. Before the census, participation in Roman society and warfare was limited to the patrizi (Older families of Roman heritage) but with the census and the creation of the Comizi Centurati Roman society became more

mobile. Roman government changed a number of times until it finally reached a specific model which included a division of powers, a system of balance and regulations of duration of terms for several positions except (Pontifex Maximus [Religious Leader] and Senatores [senators]).

In present day Italy, the administrative center of government is still in Rome, at the same location the Romans stored their 12 main laws inscribed in stone, The Capitoline Hill (Il Campidoglio). Present day Italy retains much of its connections to ancient Rome. The present system of government includes various important components of ancient Roman government such as the Senate and Consuls (Military & Executive Branch- Modern day Prime Minister and President). The Italian Constitution, however, addresses several problems such as that of war and citizenship. The fact that Roman government and politics changed gradually and over time has allowed for Italian government to switch from Papal States, city states, Monarchy and Republic over the course of three thousand years.

Another aspect that greatly made up the governing politics in ancient Rome was a close tie between religion and state. In ancient Rome, a Pontifex Maximus existed and had Religious command over the Empire; a position which later transformed to Holy Roman Emperor and later Pontifex or Pope. The Catholic Church, while still holding a seat in the city of Rome has become its own entity and is not a major player in Italian politics. Essentially, Modern Italian politics are invariably affected by the presence of the Vatican.

The Roman Empire spread as far as Asia Minor, Africa and Northern Europe. Roman currency circulated all over the Empire and has been found as far as India and

Northern Asia. Latin, the language specific to Latium (Rome), was spread over a large area and evolved into modern day Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian, etc

There is no doubt that the ancient Roman civilization was a catalyst for several things: development of governments, constant warfare, massive trading and the development of the largest Empire. The remains of this large empire spread all over the world in forms of government, language and commerce One entity that has remained true to its Roman foundations is Italy.