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Ancient Rome and the Impact on Present Day Culture

It is a generally held conception that what happened in ancient times stayed in ancient times. The culture, economics, politics, etc. of ancient civilizations are just that, ancient. Is this however really the case? Professor Italo Muntoni presented this idea of when we study ancient civilizations, in particular Ancient Rome, we aren't necessarily talking about things that happened thousands of years ago and that by now are in the past. We see remnants of ancient civilizations in current present day cultures, languages, and political systems. Taking the Roman civilization as an example, aspects of current life can find their origins and births during the Roman time period. Take the Italian language for example. Italian is considered neolatina, derived from Latin, which was the language used during Ancient Roman times.

Before the 8th century b.c, various peoples existed on the Italian peninsula. It is said that what is known as Rome was inhabited by a group of people known as "i latini." Rome was founded on April 21, 753bc. It was founded on seven hills in the Lazio region. How it was actually founded can be portrayed in two different ways. Historically, the Latini people, who were located in that area, founded Rome on the Tiber River. The Latini had called the Tiber

River “il biondo” because of the mud causing it to be yellow. The Latini people were poor but they were efficient traders.

However the birth of Rome can also be recounted using a legend. It is said that two twin brothers, Romolo e Remo, had founded the city. The twins were the sons of Rea Silvia, a Latini, and Dio Marte. The twins were eventually placed in a chest and abandoned on the Tiber River. A wolf is said to have saved them but eventually a farmer and his wife took them in. When the twins became adults, they decided that they wanted to create a city in the area where they were saved. The two brothers, however, fought and Romolo killed Remo. Romolo then declared himself the first king of Rome.

As stated previously, the 21st of April, 753bc was the birth date of Rome (in Italian it is known as “Natale di Roma” coming from the Latin “*Dies Natalis*”) (muntoni). From 753bc to 509bc, Rome was a Monarchy. There are only seven kings documented that ruled Rome in the 200 years that it was a Monarchy. However, this cannot be because if this were the case, each would have governed about 35 years. Therefore it is believed that there were in fact more kings.

The society of the Roman monarchy was characterized by patriarchal families. The male was the head of the family, although the women were not considered subordinate and had their own roles as well. Rome had an organized structure. Many families together created gens or clans. The gens were mostly based on related families however they were also created according to economics or interests. Gens were considered to be very important. In fact, the

Roman people had three names. Their first name (*praenomen* in Latin), the name of their gens (*nomen*), and finally their last name (*cognomen*). Unlike present day where our last name holds most importance, the *nomen* was considered the most important.

Roman society during the monarchy had a class structure. There were three main classes, the patrizi, the plebei, and the schiavi. The first two classes were free and were separated by wealth. The schiavi on the other hand weren't free. With this social class structure, it was very difficult, if not almost impossible, to move between classes.

The patrizi possessed much of the land. Because of this, at the beginning of the civilization, they were the only ones who were able to participate in government. The patrizi were called "latifondi" coming from the Latin *latus*, which meant vast, and *fundus*, which meant power. Therefore, they held most of the power within the society. Although they had the political power, they were also the ones that had to go to war. They were also required to purchase their own weapons and artillery.

The plebei, as mentioned, were also free and were able to have any job that they wanted. However, they were not able to participate in government. They were also not allowed to marry a member of the patrizi class.

The schiavi was the only class that was not free. One could become a schiavo in one of two ways. One of the reasons one was a schiavo was because he was a prisoner of war. The other way is if one had debts that they didn't pay and therefore they lost their liberties. This group of people were considered

objects and usually worked in the fields or in construction (*L'organizzazione Sociale e L'economia*).

At the head of the government was the king. He had both military and religious power. When one thinks of a king, one thinks of a tyranny; however, this was not the case in Rome. There was more of an organization created with what could be said as having an early system of checks and balances. Initially, the government was organized according to the *Costituzione di Romolo*. In this, the king was at the head. Then there was the Senate consisting of 300 members. The members of the Senate under Romolo's constitution were made up of members from the patrician class. They were usually the heads of families. The Senate had to approve decisions made by the king. This is an aspect of the Roman society that we still see today and is considered a modern-day concept. The Senate, in turn, was elected by all members of the patrician class. They would gather in a *Comitia Curiata* to elect the senators.

The system under Romolo was unfair because the plebeians were not included in the organization of the government. When Servius Tullius came to power around 579 or 564 BC, he slightly changed the constitution. The king was still the head and there was a Senate composed of 300 members of the patrician class. However, the patricians and the plebeians were allowed to participate and vote for the senators in the *Comitia Centuriata*. Of course, they were also required to fight in wars and buy their own armaments. Although the plebeians were allowed to vote, there was a catch.

Under Servio Tullio, the census was implemented for the first time (also a modern day concept). He then divided the people into 6 classes, again based on money. The patrizi were the 1st class and the plebei filled the rest. Each class also had an amount of votes in the comizi centuriati and therefore voting was not done by popular vote; it was proportional. Although the plebei were given political rights, the patrizi still ruled. However, with this new constitution, there was more opportunity to move between classes because they were separated by money.

Around 509bc, Rome moves a way from a monarchical government towards a republic. Roman nobles were fed up with the Etruscan king, Tarquin, and kicked him out (Smitha). Members of the leading patrizi families took over and ruled the senate. To replace the king, the senate chose two people to rule the government, known as consuls. They served one year and held most of the power however they could not declare war. That was the job of the senate. The senate was still composed of 300 members who were members of the patrizi class. There were also legislative assemblies composed of the citizens who had the power to elect the magistrates or consuls. The Roman Republic lasted until about 31bc, when Ancient Rome began to pick up and became an Empire.

Although we think of ancient Roman civilization as antique, the establishment of the civilization has had continuing impact on present day culture. Present day language is derived from the language spoken in early Roman times (Latin). Political institutions that exist today also have their origins during this Ancient civilization. When we look at present day culture, we can see

remnants of past civilizations and therefore “ancient” ideas may not always be considered of antiquity.

Works Cited

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