The Roman Legacy

Introduction

It is difficult to argue that the Romans were profoundly influenced by the Greeks, who colonized the southern Italian peninsula, transferring their art, literature, philosophy, and religion. Others lived in the area as well including the Etruscans, Latins, and Celts. The Romans would take aspects of all cultures and make them their own. In addition, they would solidify the Hellenization begun by Alexander the Great by spreading Greek culture across the Western world.

The Etruscans

In the central part of the Italian peninsula, modern Tuscany, a people that historians call the Etruscans developed a civilization that roughly coincides with the Greek Archaic period. We know little about them, but their influence on the Romans was nearly as profound as the Greeks. They were skilled at working in metals, and among the most important contributions they gave to the world, through the Romans, was the arch.

The Romans

The contributions to Western culture by the Romans are enormous. To some, the Romans might seem unimaginative, but they "produced remarkable achievements of [their] own in the fields of politics, law and engineering" (Benton & DiYanni, 2005, p. 155). They gave the world language, law, politics, religion, and art as well as the alphabet, the twelve-month calendar, and even the blueprint for Europe's roadways.

Despite the influence of the Greeks, the Romans were their own people. Industrious and practical, they took pieces of other cultures and changed them to something distinctly Roman. The arch, for example, appears to have come from the Etruscans, but it was the Romans who perfected it and developed the dome. They did not invent cement, but they made it better. In copying Greek statuary, they preserved many great works of art that would have otherwise been lost. Whatever they touched, they accepted and changed. "The Roman genius for organization and problem solving is among its most significant cultural legacies" (Benton & DiYanni, 2005, p. 179).

The Romans were in fact surprisingly modest about their own cultural achievements, believing that their strengths lay in good government and military prowess rather than in artistic and intellectual attainments. It was their view that Rome should get on with the job of ruling the world and leave luxuries like sculpture and astronomy to others. (Cunningham & Reich, 2006, p. 127)

Rule the world, they did. They brought their passion for law to the outermost reaches of the Empire and invented civil law, which was the foundation for legal systems in
many Western nations. They brought forward, too, ideas of natural law from the philosophy of stoicism, which became the basis for those inalienable rights written by Thomas Jefferson in the American Declaration of Independence.

Along with law, they brought the ideas of civilization to the Empire. Roman civilization was preferred, of course, but the Romans incorporated ideas from other cultures into their own. Because of this, Christianity went from a cult to a full-fledged religion that would deeply impact Western culture.

However, if the Romans were civilized, they could also be barbaric. Blood sport was popular, and the persecution of Christians (and others) is well known. Romans had slaves, and women had few rights.

In the end, people must consider the whole of the Romans and celebrate their accomplishments while remembering that, horrible as some Roman actions might be to modern people, it is not for modern people to judge by their cultural standards but to allow the ancient Romans to do that for themselves.

References
