

# what the ROMANS did for us...

The Roman Empire eventually came to dominate Western Europe and the Mediterranean. Pioneering engineers, the Roman legacy includes roads, sanitation, aqueducts, bridges, baths, theatres and arenas. Their influence on culture, law, language, government and military remains to this day. But what of their funeral traditions? We take a look at the Roman way of death.

The Roman Republic and Empire lasted hundreds of years and, within that time, customs varied but archaeologists and historians are still able to give us an insight into the funeral rituals of the Romans and their beliefs about the afterlife.

Remembering and honouring the dead was important to the Romans, and funeral practices played a central role in their life. Souls were believed to go to the underworld, unless the gods denied them attendance when they were condemned to wander in limbo forever.

The Romans thought the dead were also able, in some vague way, to influence the fortunes of the living, so

gifts and offerings were made to the deceased and celebrations held at their tombs. To stop the dead haunting the living, and to free the spirit from the body, the deceased were sometimes decapitated just before burial.

Burial and cremation were not allowed within towns or cities, except for young children who were laid to rest near their homes. This was probably to keep disease from spreading but also because of their beliefs - making sure that the soul stayed in the underworld, and did not come back to disturb the living. Eventually, cemeteries were set aside for burials and, as land became in short supply, the Romans carved out underground cemeteries called catacombs.

The Romans used both burial and cremation in the first and second centuries but, by the third century AD, there was a shift to burial, probably as a result of a rise in Christianity amongst the Roman population.

At a cremation, perfume was thrown on the flames and gifts and personal belongings for use in the afterlife were often added to the pyre. When the fire died down, wine was poured over it. The mother or wife would collect the ashes in a container, which could be anything from a bag to an ornate urn or casket.

For burials, the poor would be wrapped in a sack or shroud and the wealthy were placed in a coffin made of wood, lead or stone - a sarcophagus (a Greek word which means "flesh eater"). Bodies were often embalmed in gypsum plaster.

After the funeral there was a feast, and offerings of food and drink were made to the deceased as they believed that the deceased could toast the living. The family would hold another feast nine days later, and then on feast days for the dead for years to come.



◀ Ancient Roman marble sarcophagus of the third century AD, located in Cordoba, Spain.

Like today, Romans used professional undertakers. They would provide professional mourning women, musicians and sometimes dancers and mines.

Before the funeral the deceased were laid out on display, the length of which depended on social status. The upper classes would be displayed for a week, the poor just one day.

The poor usually had simple funerals but, for the rich, it was a different story. There would be a procession with musicians, dancers, professional mourners and a eulogy at the forum - where the deceased was displayed upright. The deceased's family would wear the death mask of ancestors or carry portrait sculptures. The funeral procession was often held at night, to discourage large public gatherings and civil unrest. Mourners wore dark colours and, whilst the period of mourning for men was a few days, for women it was a year for a husband or parent.

The preparation of the deceased also reflected Roman beliefs about the afterlife. A gold coin

was often placed in the mouth, which was the legendary fee of the underworld ferryman Charon - who would take them across the mythological River Styx to ensure they passed safely to the underworld. They were often buried with boots and lamps to help them on their journey. The deceased were washed and laid out in their best clothes.

To help those with less money, Roman funeral clubs were established - *collegia* - which, for monthly dues, ensured that even the poor could pass safely to the afterlife. Membership of the *collegia* guaranteed a resting place for ashes in a columbarium, a large underground vault where cremated remains were placed in riches, often marked by memorial plaques and sculptures. Some emperors provided a funeral allowance to the very poor who could not afford to belong to a *collegia*, such was the concern that a proper burial was essential for passage to the afterlife.

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## The Romans in Britain

The Romans arrived in Britain in the first century. They set up administrative centres and made the conquered people responsible for their own administration. The Romans saw urban life as the key to civilisation. They encouraged the growth of towns as centres of commercial activity near their army bases, and established special towns as settlements for retired soldiers. Every town had public baths, a Roman institution.

The Romans built over 9600 kilometres of roads in Britain, connecting these towns. There was also a growth in villas, built close to major urban centres, and these were the centres of rural industry and agriculture. Under the Romans, Britain exported cattle, grain, lead, iron and tin, and local pottery industries and ironworking flourished.

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