

THE ROMAN EMPIRE

IN THE FIRST CENTURY

Rome Lesson Plan 8: Slaves, the Labor Force, and the Economy

Introduction:

In this lesson, students will examine the various social classes and learn about the critical role that slaves, freemen, and plebeians played in the day-to-day operations of the Roman Empire. Students will learn about the various social classes and the life experiences of people from these classes. As a final activity, students will complete a creative writing assignment that addresses how the Roman class system and the use of slavery may have ultimately contributed to the downfall of the Roman Empire.

Subject Areas:

World History, Social Studies, Economics, and Communication Arts

Grade Level: 6-12

Lesson Objectives:

Students will:

1. Participate in class discussion and group reading activities related to the social classes of the Roman Empire.
2. View video clips and Web site content that illustrates the differences between the Roman social classes and provides clues about the way lower class citizens and slaves were treated by the upper class.
3. View a map of products and trade routes used by the Roman Empire and use the information from the map to draw conclusions about the importance of slave labor.
4. Complete a study guide by using primary sources such as the companion Web site to answer a number of questions about the Roman labor force.
5. Participate in a class discussion about the long-term effects of a slavery driven economy on the Roman Empire.
6. Complete a creative writing assignment about life in the lower social classes and the significance of the job s/he performs.

Relevant National Standards:

McRel Compendium of K-12 Standards Addressed:

World History

Standard 9: Understands how major religious and large-scale empires arose in the Mediterranean Basin, China, and Indian from 500 BCE to 300 CE.

Standard 11: Understands major global trends from 1000 BCE to 300 CE.

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Historical Understanding

Standard 2: Understands the historical perspective.

Language Arts

Writing

Standard 2: Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.

Standard 3: Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions.

Standard 4: Gathers and uses information for research purposes.

Reading

Standard 5: Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process.

Standard 7: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts.

Listening and Speaking

Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

Thinking and Reasoning

Standard 1: Understands the basic principles of presenting an argument.

Standard 3: Effectively uses mental processes that are based on identifying similarities and differences.

Working with Others

Standard 4: Displays effective interpersonal communication skills.

Estimated Time:

This should take two 90-minute class periods or two to three 50-minute class periods, plus additional time for extension activities.

Materials Needed:

- Video clips necessary to complete the lesson plan are available on The Roman Empire in the First Century Web site [<http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/index.html>]. If you wish to purchase a copy of the program, visit the PBS Shop for Teachers [[Purchase DVD or Video](#)].

Procedures:

1. To create student interest, ask the following question:
 - How does the amount of money a person has affect the way s/he might be treated by others in a given society? Give examples to support your ideas.

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- You have heard the saying, “The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.” What does this mean?
- When looking at social classes in almost every society, what requirements must be met in order to be at the top of the social order?

2. Access The Roman Empire in the First Century Web site's

[\[http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/index.html\]](http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/index.html) feature on Social Order

[\[http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/order.html\]](http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/order.html). As a class, read the content of this page to learn the names of some of the social classes that made up the empire.

Next, take time as a group to read about the:

- Patricians [\[http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/patricians.html\]](http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/patricians.html)
- Senators [\[http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/senators.html\]](http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/senators.html)
- Equestrians [\[http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/equestrians.html\]](http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/equestrians.html)
- Plebeians [\[http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/plebians.html\]](http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/plebians.html)
- Slaves and Freeman [\[http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/slaves.html\]](http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/slaves.html)

After you have learned some basic characteristics of each social class, discuss the following:

- Which group(s) had the largest population and was most representative of the Roman citizenry?
- Which group do you think was most important to the daily operations and work required to keep the Roman Empire functioning? Why?

3. To further illustrate the differences between the social classes in Rome, view the video clips Episode 1: Urban Life [insert pbs link <http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/resources/video.html>], Episode 3: Seneca's Lessons [\[http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/resources/video.html\]](http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/resources/video.html). In addition, access the Virtual Library feature [\[http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/special/library.html\]](http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/special/library.html) and read Seneca on Slaves [\[http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/special/library.html\]](http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/special/library.html).

Discuss the clips and the excerpt using questions such as:

- How would you describe the lifestyle of an average Roman?
- How do you think most people treated their slaves based on the words of Seneca?
- Why do you think Seneca encouraged the Romans to “treat your inferior as you would like to be treated”?
- Based on what you have seen and heard, what threat did people in the lower social classes present to Roman leaders?

4. Using the Trade in the Roman Empire map

[\[http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~atlas/europe/interactive/map32.html\]](http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~atlas/europe/interactive/map32.html) or something

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similar, discuss the various goods that were produced and traded in each area of the empire. Facilitate a discussion about how the various social classes were a part of this economy by asking questions such as:

- In what way were the plebeians, slaves, and freemen critically important to trade in the Roman Empire?
 - How might the use of slave labor have enabled the Romans to be more competitive in the world market? Less competitive?
5. To help students better understand the importance of the lower classes in the Roman economy, distribute the [Economics of Ancient Rome Study Guide \[Download PDF here \(192k\)\]](#) to all students. Explain that they will use the questions on the guide to help them learn more about the contributions of the lower classes to the success of the Roman economy. Review the directions with the class, and then provide students with time to find the answers to the questions listed.
 6. When students have completed the study guide, have them gather into a large group and discuss the answers for each question.
 7. Based on what they have learned about the Roman economic system, have students discuss the following questions:
 - How would the absence of slave labor have impacted the spread of the Roman Empire and its wealth?
 - In what ways did slave labor cause the Romans to become lazy?
 - Was slave labor profitable? If so, how?
 - In what ways did the roles of Plebeians, slaves, and freeman in ancient Rome illustrate the saying “The rich get richer and the poor get poorer”?
 8. As a closing activity, have students write a diary or journal entry, a letter, or a story describing life as a Plebeian, slave, or freeman in ancient Rome and why his/her job is important.

Assessment Suggestions:

1. Students could receive participation grades for class discussion activities.
2. An accuracy or completion grade could be assigned for work done on the Economics of Ancient Rome Study Guide.
3. Students could earn a completion or accuracy grade for work done on the closing creative writing assignment.

Extension Activities:

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1. Have students compare the economic impact of slave labor in ancient Rome with the economic impact of slave labor in the American south prior to the Civil War. Create a Venn Diagram to chart your comparisons.
2. Compare the Roman social classes with the social classes that exist in America today. Create a pyramid or chart that compares the two sets of social classes and discusses the similarities and differences between them.

Related Resources:

The Camelot Village Web site [<http://www.camelotintl.com/>] has a page on Trade Within the Empire [<http://www.camelotintl.com/romans/trade.html>]. This provides a discussion of the empire's monetary system and the values of various coins. There is also general information about trade and the economy.

The Geocities page on Trade [<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Stage/3591/trade.html>] offers a summary of trade practices and schedules in the Roman Empire.

The Trade in the Roman Empire map [<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~atlas/europe/interactive/map32.html>] shows the trade routes and different trade items generated around the empire.

The Ancient Roman Economy Web pages [<http://www.unrv.com/economy.php>] summarize the way Rome operated using agriculture and trade routes within the empire.

The History for Kids Web site [<http://www.historyforkids.org/>] has pages on the Roman Economy [<http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/romans/economy/>]. These provide two different descriptions of how historians believe the Romans financed their empire with specific focus on farming and taxation.