

The Romans
FOR
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by Guy de la Bédoyère



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Contents at a Glance

<i>Introduction</i>	1
<i>Part I: Romans – The Big Boys of the Ancient World</i>	7
Chapter 1: The Romans: Shaping Their World and Ours	9
Chapter 2: It’s the Cash That Counts: Roman Social Classes	29
Chapter 3: Stairway to the Stars: The Greasy Path to Power	47
Chapter 4: Rural Bliss – Roman Dreamland	61
Chapter 5: When We Were Soldiers	71
<i>Part II: Living the Good Life</i>	87
Chapter 6: The Urban Jungle	89
Chapter 7: Making the Roman Machine Work	103
Chapter 8: Entertainments: Epic and Domestic	121
Chapter 9: Divine Intervention	143
<i>Part III: The Rise of Rome</i>	165
Chapter 10: Kings? No, Maybe Not – Republicans	167
Chapter 11: This Town Isn’t Big Enough for All of Us – Seizing Italy	185
Chapter 12: Carthage and the First Two Punic Wars	199
Chapter 13: While We’re at It – Let’s Conquer Everywhere Else, Too	215
<i>Part IV: When Romans Ruled the World</i>	225
Chapter 14: Reform and Civil War	227
Chapter 15: Daggers Drawn – The Fall of the Republic	255
Chapter 16: Augustus and the Caesars – Plots, Perverts, and Paranoia	271
Chapter 17: The Five Good Emperors	303
<i>Part V: Throwing the Empire Away</i>	317
Chapter 18: More Civil War, Auctioning the Empire, and Paranoid Lunatics	319
Chapter 19: The Age of the Thug – The Third Century’s Soldier Emperors	331
Chapter 20: East Is East and West Is West: Diocletian and Constantine	347
Chapter 21: The Barbarians Are Coming! The End of Rome	369

<i>Part VI: The Part of Tens</i>	389
Chapter 22: Ten Turning Points in Roman History	391
Chapter 23: Ten Interesting and Occasionally Good Romans	395
Chapter 24: Ten (Mostly) Bad Romans	401
Chapter 25: Ten of Rome's Greatest Enemies	407
Chapter 26: Ten (or So) Great Roman Places to Visit	413
<i>Index</i>	419

Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	1
About This Book.....	2
Foolish Assumptions	2
How This Book Is Organised.....	3
Part I: Romans – the Big Boys of the Ancient World.....	3
Part II: Living the Good Life.....	3
Part III: The Rise of Rome	4
Part IV: When Romans Ruled the World	4
Part V: Throwing the Empire Away	4
Part VI: The Part of Tens	5
Icons Used in This Book.....	5
Where to Go from Here.....	6

Part 1: Romans – The Big Boys of the Ancient World..... **7**

Chapter 1: The Romans: Shaping Their World and Ours **9**

Being Roman	10
The Roman national identity	10
The Roman myth of destiny.....	11
Roman history, blow by blow	11
Discovering the Romans	15
Great ruins and ruined cities	15
The survival of Roman books	16
Bringing the Romans home: Roman artifacts	18
Roman excavations: The Pompeii sensation	19
What the Romans Did for Us	20
The Roman image of power	21
Language.....	23
Law ‘n’ order	24
Philosophy	25
The idea of city	26
A Long Time Ago but Not That Far Away.....	28

Chapter 2: It’s the Cash That Counts: Roman Social Classes **29**

First Things First: The Roman Family.....	29
Being on Top – Upper-crust Romans	31
Nobles (Nobiles).....	32
Equestrians (Equites)	34

Ordinary Citizens	34
Roman citizens	35
Latin citizens	36
Everyone else: Provincials	37
Are You Being Served?	38
Slaves	38
Freedmen	39
Women and Children Last!	41
Women	41
Children	44
Chapter 3: Stairway to the Stars: The Greasy Path to Power	47
Roman Assemblies	48
The Comitia Curiata ('Assembly of the Divisions')	48
The Comitia Centuriata ('Assembly of the Centuries')	48
The Concilium Plebis Tributum ('Council of the Plebeians arranged by Tribes')	49
The Senate	51
The Emperors	52
The emperor's titles	52
Multitasking: The emperor's jobs	54
The line of succession	55
Climbing to the Top	56
A career ladder for senators	56
The equestrian career ladder	59
Chapter 4: Rural Bliss – Roman Dreamland	61
The Roman Fantasy Self-image: We're Farmers at Heart	62
Life in the City; Dreams in the Country	63
Escaping the city	63
Buying and investing in land	64
Villas: Bedrock of Roman Agriculture	67
Here a villa, there a villa	67
Imperial and giant estates	67
Villas in the later years of the Empire	69
A Quick Rural Reality Check	70
Chapter 5: When We Were Soldiers	71
Mastering the Universe: The Fighting Men	71
Legions and legionaries	72
The auxiliaries	75
The Praetorian Guard: Rome's garrison	77
The fleet: Rome's navy	77
Having the Right Equipment	78
Uniforms and weapons	78
Artillery	79

Holding the Fort80
 Fort defences80
 Fort buildings81
 Marching camps82
 Keeping the enemy out: Frontier fortifications83
 The Late Army84
 Dividing the army84
 New forts for the late army84
 The end of the Roman army in the West85

Part II: Living the Good Life.....87

Chapter 6: The Urban Jungle89

The Idea of City89
 Rome: The urban template.....90
 Improving the model city92
 Copycat Romes94
 Two Brilliant Ideas95
 Concrete95
 Arches and vaults.....96
 The most famous architect – Vitruvius97
 All Roads Lead to Rome98
 Road-building basics.....99
 Helping travellers: Road maps, itineraries, and more100
 Imperial post (cursus publicus).....101

Chapter 7: Making the Roman Machine Work103

Trade Around the Empire103
 Ostia: The port of Rome104
 International trade104
 The merchants and guild system106
 Goodies from Around the World107
 Food, glorious food: The grain supply.....108
 Mining for metals.....109
 Money, Money, Money110
 Propaganda coins.....111
 Comparative values112
 Inflation.....112
 Turning on the Taps.....113
 Getting water into cities: Aqueducts114
 Wells and reservoirs115
 Baths116
 Getting rid of water: Rome’s sewers117
 Keeping Well: Medicine118
 Medical science in the Roman era118
 Medicine for the masses.....120

Chapter 8: Entertainments: Epic and Domestic	121
Introducing the Games	121
Bonding the population	122
The gaming calendar	122
The Playing Fields: Arenas and Stadiums	123
Building an arena	125
The Colosseum	125
Stadiums	126
Fighting Men: Gladiators	128
The gladiators: Who they were	129
Schools for scoundrels	129
The fear of gladiators	130
Putting on a gladiatorial show	130
Fighting Animals	131
Supplying animals	132
Animals in the arena	132
Epic Shows and Mock Battles	133
A Day at the Races – Chariot-racing	133
Roman chariots	134
The charioteers	134
Fans	134
Pantos and Plays: Roman Theatre	135
Theatre floor plans	136
Roman music	136
Actors and impresarios	137
The show must go on: Performances and oratory competitions	138
A Night In: Entertaining at Home	139
Party invite	140
Tableware	141
The menu	141
Chapter 9: Divine Intervention	143
Cutting a Deal: Roman Religion	144
Divining the future	145
Non-believers and charlatans	147
Roman Temples and Shrines	149
Classical temples	150
Regional temples	151
Shrines	151
The Divine Mission: Roman Gods	152
Public religion: Jupiter, Juno, Mars – the famous ones	152
Household and family gods	155
Emperor worship	156
Integrating Gods from Elsewhere	157
Joining Roman gods to foreign gods: Conflation	157
Curiouser and curiouser: Mystery cults	158
The Religion that Refused to Be Assimilated: Christianity	159

Problems with Christianity160
 Persecutions160
 Tolerance and turning tables161
 Burning and Burying: The Roman Way of Death.....162
 Roman afterlife: The Underworld.....162
 Cemeteries and graves162
 Worshipping ancestors and burial feasts.....164

Part III: The Rise of Rome 165

Chapter 10: Kings? No, Maybe Not – Republicans167

The Founding of Rome167
 The myth168
 The true story169
 Early Rome: Hills with huts, and a very big sewer169
 Rome’s neighbours.....171
 The Magnificent Eight: The Kings (753–535 BC)173
 Romulus (753–716 BC).....173
 Numa Pompilius (715–673 BC).....174
 Tullus Hostilius (673–641 BC).....175
 Ancus Marcius (641–616 BC)175
 Tarquinius Priscus (616–579 BC).....175
 Servius Tullius (579–535 BC)176
 Tarquinius Superbus (535–509 BC).....177
 The benefits of the Etruscan kings.....177
 The Birth of the Roman Republic178
 The new constitution179
 Patricians vs. plebs180
 Conflict of the Orders: A Roman class war181
 One law to rule them all – the Twelve Tables (450 BC).....182
 Plebs’ rights – the man with the trump card183

Chapter 11: This Town Isn’t Big Enough for All of Us – Seizing Italy185

Winning Over the Latin League (493 BC)186
 Fights with the Etruscans186
 The creation of the Latin League187
 Rome: At odds with the Latin League.....187
 Doing a deal with the Latins.....187
 Crushing the local opposition188
 Having the Gaul to Invade – 390 BC189
 Getting sacked189
 Changes at home189

Knocking out the Samnites	192
The First Samnite War (343–341 BC).....	192
Meanwhile . . . the Latins strike back.....	193
The Second Samnite War (326–304 BC).....	194
Try, try, and try again: The Third Samnite War (298–290 BC)	195
Now for the Rest of Italy.....	195
Pyrrhus arrives to show who’s who.....	196
By Jove, I think we’ve done it	197

Chapter 12: Carthage and the First Two Punic Wars199

The Sicilian Story – the First Punic War (264–241 BC).....	199
The Mamertines play with fire.....	200
Messana isn’t enough: Going for Sicily	201
Battles and victory at sea: Becoming a naval power	201
Setting the stage for the Second Punic War	203
Staying busy in the interim: Capturing northern Italy.....	203
The Second Punic War (218–202 BC).....	204
The amazing march of elephants	205
The Battle of Lake Trasimene – 217 BC	206
Catastrophe at Cannae – 216 BC.....	206
Bloody and bruised, but still swinging	207
Scipio in the nick of time	208
The Battle of Zama – 202 BC	209
Trouble in the East: The Macedonian Wars.....	209
A bit of background: Philip V and Illyrian pirates	210
The First Macedonian War (214–205 BC)	211
The Second Macedonian War (200–197 BC)	211
The Third Macedonian War (172–167 BC).....	212
The spoils of Greece (Achaëa).....	213
The Secret of Success: The Comeback.....	214

Chapter 13: While We’re at It – Let’s Conquer Everywhere Else, Too215

How the West Was Won	216
First stop: Northern Italy.....	216
Relaxing by the Riviera.....	216
The Reign in Spain, 197–179 BC.....	217
Conquering Spain’s tribes	217
Return to war	218
The destruction of Numantia.....	219
Why the Spanish wars were different	219
The Third Punic War (151–146 BC)	219
Hannibal patches up Carthage	220
The ambitions of Masinissa: Provoke Carthaginians	220

Rome's response: Wipe out Carthage!	221
The final indignity: Salt on the wounds	221
Mopping Up the East	222
The ambitions of Antiochus III	222
Cramping Antiochus III's style	223
Winning the lottery: Gaining Pergamon	224

***Part IV: When Romans Ruled the World*225**

Chapter 14: Reform and Civil War 227

Crisis in Rome.....	227
Power to the people! – Not	228
The rise of the equestrians	229
The trouble with allies	229
A soldier's tale	230
Slaves to circumstance	231
Enter the Gracchi	231
Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus	232
Gaius Gracchus	234
The aftermath of the Gracchi.....	236
Marius the New Man – and More Unrest	236
Fighting the Jugurthine War	237
The 'Northmen' advance.....	238
Suppressing a slave revolt in Sicily	238
Marius's downfall	239
Fighting Your Friends: The Social War (90–88 BC).....	240
Wrong-footing the allies	240
Extending the franchise and ending the war	241
Think the Unthinkable: A Roman Captures Rome – Sulla (88 BC)	241
Taking Rome and settling Mithridates	242
Marius and Cinna fight back	242
I'll be back: Sulla comes home.....	243
Dictator of Rome	243
Retiring alive and dying peacefully	244
Well, They Started Out As Mates: The Age of the Generals.....	245
Gnaeus Pompeius (Pompey) (106–48 BC).....	246
Marcus Licinius Crassus (c. 115 to 53 BC)	248
The most famous Roman of them all: Julius Caesar	248
The Gang of Three: The First Triumvirate (60 BC)	249
Building his power base: Caesar and the Gallic Wars.....	251
Meanwhile back in Rome	252
Renewing the Triumvirate.....	253
Death of Crassus and the crumbling Triumvirate.....	253

Chapter 15: Daggers Drawn – The Fall of the Republic	255
Civil War	256
Deadly deals	256
Crossing the Rubicon (50 BC)	256
Cutting off Pompey at the head (48 BC)	257
Caesar: Leader of the Roman World	259
Caesar’s new order	259
Hey, we didn’t want a king! (44 BC)	260
The fatal blow (44 BC)	261
A hideous mistake and the rise of Mark Antony	262
Picking Caesar’s heir: Mark Antony or Octavian?	264
Octavian and the End of the Republic (44–43 BC)	265
The second Gang of Three: The Second Triumvirate (43 BC)	266
Blood, guts, and gods	266
The Battle of Philippi	266
The bust up starts	267
Antony and Cleopatra	267
Throwing down the gauntlet	268
The Battle of Actium (31 BC)	268
Chapter 16: Augustus and the Caesars – Plots, Perverts, and Paranoia	271
Augustus (aka Octavian) and His Powers	272
Restoring the Republic	272
The Emperor who wasn’t an Emperor	273
Augustus: The radical conservative	275
Finding it brick and leaving it marble	276
Sorting out the borders	277
The disaster of AD 9	279
A son, a son! My kingdom for a son!	279
Augustus’s death	280
Augustus’s Dynasty: Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero (AD 14–68)	280
Tiberius – part good, part bad, part pervert (AD 14–37)	281
Making your horse a consul is a bad idea: Caligula (AD 37–41)	283
The dribbling old halfwit done good: Claudius (AD 41–54)	286
Where mother went wrong: Nero (AD 54–68)	289
The Year of the Four Emperors (AD 68–69)	294
Too old and too tight: Galba (AD 68–69)	294
A man of many enemies: Otho (AD 69)	294
The gluttonous emperor: Vitellius (AD 69)	295
The rise of Vespasian	296
Starting Well and Finishing Badly – the Flavians (AD 69–96)	296
Mr Down-to-earth: Vespasian AD 69–79	297
The much-loved Titus (AD 79–81)	298
Paranoid fly-killer: Domitian (AD 81–96)	300

Chapter 17: The Five Good Emperors	303
Nerva: A Good Stopgap (AD 96–98)	304
Smart moves and good deeds.....	304
Foiling plots and picking a successor	305
Trajan: Right Man for the Job (AD 98–117)	305
Trajan in Rome.....	306
War with Dacia and Parthia.....	306
Trajan’s legacy	308
Hadrian, Artist and Aesthete (AD 117–138)	309
A dodgy succession	309
Hadrian in Rome.....	310
Enough’s enough: Touring the provinces.....	310
Growing ill in mind and body.....	312
Choosing a successor	312
Antoninus Pius: Nice and Vice-free (AD 138–161)	313
Antoninus in Rome.....	313
On the borders.....	314
Smelling the Storm Brewing: Marcus Aurelius (AD 161–180)	314
Appointing a partner	315
Marcus the warrior.....	315
Who comes next? Picking a successor	316
The End of the Good Old Days	316

***Part V: Throwing the Empire Away*** **317**

Chapter 18: More Civil War, Auctioning the Empire, and Paranoid Lunatics	319
I Think I’m Hercules: Commodus(AD 180–192)	319
Commodus and the affairs of state	320
Commodus the gladiator.....	321
Plots against Commodus and his demise.....	321
Pertinax: The 87-Day Wonder	322
Reintroducing discipline	322
Ticking off the soldiers	323
Biting the dust	323
Didius Julianus and Civil War	323
Septimius Severus (AD 193–211).....	324
Securing the throne.....	325
Dividing and ruling.....	326
Severus’s death.....	328
Not Living Up to Dad’s Expectations – Caracalla (AD 211–217)	328
Getting rid of Geta and a host of others	329
Universal citizenship (AD 212)	329
Caracalla’s indulgences	330
The end of Caracalla	330

Chapter 19: The Age of the Thug – The Third Century’s Soldier Emperors	331
The First Thug on the Throne: Marcus Opellius Macrinus.....	332
How to take the throne.....	332
How to lose popularity	332
How to lose the throne	333
Elagabalus (AD 218–222).....	333
Elagabalus’s god	335
Elagabalus’s government.....	335
Elagabalus’s women	335
The end of Elagabalus.....	336
Severus Alexander (AD 222–235)	336
A little stability in a sea of chaos	337
But not all is well	337
The end of Alexander and Julia	338
Blink and you’ll miss them: A slew of emperors who followed Alexander	338
Valerian I (AD 253–260) and Gallienus (253–268).....	339
Valerian dies and a rebellion starts.....	340
Events in the Palymrenes	340
The Gallic Empire breaks away	340
Gallienus’s death and the next emperor, Claudius II	341
Aurelian (AD 270–275).....	341
Annihilating Palmyra	342
The end of the Gallic Empire	342
Aurelian at home	342
The death of Aurelian	343
Probus (AD 276–282)	344
The End of the Principate	344
Chapter 20: East Is East and West Is West: Diocletian and Constantine	347
On the Case: Diocletian (AD 284–305).....	348
Four emperors are better than one: The Tetrarchy.....	348
Repairing the broken Empire.....	349
The Dominate: A new order	351
The rebellion in Britain: Carausius	352
Like all the best ideas: The Tetrarchy falls apart	353
Constantine I, the Great (AD 307–337)	355
Taking control of the West	356
Issuing the Edict of Milan, 313.....	356
East vs. West: Fighting Licinius.....	357
The Empire goes Christian.....	358
Moving house: The capital goes to a new location.....	361
Managing money	362
Paranoia and the succession	362
Constantine’s loving family – not!	363

Constantius II (AD 337–361).....	364
The Magnentian Revolt.....	364
Constantius II in power.....	366
Resolving the Arian versus Catholic crisis	366
Bringing Back Pagans: Julian II ‘the Apostate’ (AD 360–363)	366
Turning back the clock	367
Julian in charge.....	368

Chapter 21: The Barbarians Are Coming! The End of Rome 369

A Rundown of Barbarians	370
Going Downhill – Barbarians at the Door	371
Breaking the Empire into East and West	372
Valentinian I in the West (AD 364–375)	372
Valens in the East (AD 364–378)	372
At Last! Someone Who Knows What He’s Doing:	
Theodosius I the Great (AD 379–395)	373
Hiring the Visigoths.....	374
Breaking it up again: Revolts.....	374
Death of Theodosius	375
Sacking Rome.....	375
Stilicho: Buying off the Visigoths	375
Alaric and the fall of Rome in 410.....	376
Staggering On	377
Attila the Hun (ruled AD 434–453)	378
The murders of Aetius (AD 454) and Valentinian III (AD 455)	379
The next few emperors and the rise of Ricimer	380
The last emperor in the West:	
Romulus Augustus (AD 475–476).....	381
What Became of Rome’s Western Provinces	382
In the East: The Byzantine Empire	383
Religious tensions	383
Justinian I (AD 527–565)	384
The Great Schism of 1054.....	386
The toll of the Crusades	387
The fall of Byzantium	387
The end of the ancient world.....	388

***Part VI: The Part of Tens*.....389**

Chapter 22: Ten Turning Points in Roman History 391

Kicking out the Kings (509 BC).....	391
Creating the Twelve Tables (450 BC).....	391
Winning the Second Punic War (218–202 BC).....	392
The year 146 BC.....	392
Augustus’s settlements with the Senate in 27 and 19 BC.....	392
Breaking the link between the emperor and Rome (AD 68–69)	393

Ending the tradition of conquest (AD 117–138)	393
Dividing the Roman world (AD 284–305)	393
The Edict of Milan (AD 313)	394
The fall of Rome (AD 410)	394

Chapter 23: Ten Interesting and Occasionally Good Romans 395

Cincinnatus (519–438 BC)	395
Scipio Africanus the Elder (236–185 BC)	395
Marcus Sergius (late third century BC)	396
Marcus Porcius Cato (234–149 BC)	396
Gaius Gracchus (d. 121 BC)	397
Julius Caesar (102–44 BC)	397
Augustus (63 BC–AD 14)	397
Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79)	398
Carausius (reigned AD 286–293)	398
Sextus Valerius Genialis (late first century AD)	399

Chapter 24: Ten (Mostly) Bad Romans 401

Tarquinius Superbus (535–509 BC)	401
Coriolanus (527–490 BC)	401
Sulla (138–78 BC)	402
Sergius Catilinus (d. 63 BC)	402
Gaius Verres (c. 109–c. 43 BC)	403
Caligula (reigned AD 37–41)	403
Nero (reigned AD 54–68)	403
Commodus (reigned AD 180–192)	404
Didius Julianus (reigned AD 193)	404
Caracalla (reigned AD 211–217)	404
Elagabalus (reigned AD 218–222)	405

Chapter 25: Ten of Rome's Greatest Enemies 407

Hannibal (247–182 BC)	407
Antiochus III (242–187 BC)	407
Mithridates VI, King of Pontus (120–63 BC)	408
Spartacus (fl. 73–71 BC)	408
Cleopatra VII of Egypt (69–31 BC)	409
Vercingetorix (fl. 52 BC, d. 46 BC)	409
Caratacus (d. AD 43–51)	410
Boudica (d. AD 61)	410
Simon Bar Cochba (fl. AD 132–135)	411
The German tribes	411

Chapter 26: Ten (or So) Great Roman Places to Visit 413

Rome and Ostia	413
Pompeii and Herculaneum	414
Ravenna	414

Ephesus	414
Aphrodisias	415
Sbeitla	415
Piazza Armerina	415
Hadrian's Wall	416
Petra.....	416
Dendara	416
Bath.....	417

<i>Index</i>	<i>419</i>
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Introduction

When I was about 12 years old, my father came home from work with a Roman coin he'd bought for me. It was very worn, with a barely visible profile of a Roman emperor's head on one side. But I was totally fascinated by the sudden realisation that this coin had existed for a length of time I was struggling to imagine. It belonged to a truly amazing world of emperors, vast buildings, epic wars, villains, and heroes. And I could hold a part of it in my hand!

Roman history is a hotch-potch made up from every, or indeed, any source that historians and archaeologists have been able to get their hands on. There's no one-stop ancient source of Roman history, no great Roman textbook that we can pick up and start with. Even the Romans were more than a bit hazy about how their world had come together. They had historians, but most of what got written down hasn't survived. Even the works we do have are usually incomplete. What we do know is that the further the Romans looked back into their past, the more they had to fill in the gaps with myth and hearsay.

If you think back to learning about the Romans at school or watching a documentary on TV, you'd probably have come across things that sounded really exciting, like Mount Vesuvius erupting and burying Pompeii in AD 79. But you probably also got the idea that the Romans were also dreadfully serious. Some museums don't help either because rows and rows of dusty pots aren't very inspiring, especially if you had to troop around with a question sheet while on a school trip.

But the truth is that the Roman Empire is one of the most exciting periods in all history. Not only is it packed with real people living real lives, but it also has an unending series of remarkable events that mark the rise of a little village in Italy all the way from total prehistoric obscurity into the greatest of all ancient civilisations.

The Roman world is all around us. In Europe, North Africa, and the Near East, the debris is there to see wherever you go. From the crumbling line of Hadrian's Wall in northern England all the way to the rock-cut tombs of Petra in Jordan, the Romans left their mark everywhere they went and created the world's first superstate. The very fact that it's long gone is why we should use it as a mirror for our own age. 'All Things Must Pass,' said George Harrison, and when it comes to empires, he couldn't have been more correct.

About This Book

Teaching Latin goes back right to the Middle Ages. In the nineteenth century, the Victorians loved the Romans and used them as a kind of justification for what they were doing: conquering the world, basically. So Latin and ancient history were major subjects, and things didn't change for years. Generations of schoolchildren – actually, in the 1960s I was one of them – had to learn Latin so that they could translate lines like 'Caesar attacked the enemy's fortifications'. The upshot was that the Romans looked like a rather boring master-race of generals and politicians, who did a lot of standing around in togas when they weren't massacring other people. Hardly thrilling stuff and apparently completely irrelevant to today, but thanks to archaeology, cinema, and TV, they're now enjoying something of a revival.

The story's miles more interesting than that, so the idea behind this book is to tell it like it was: a rollercoaster of a drama packed with amazing events and amazing people. Now it's easy to get the idea that all the Romans came from Rome, and it was just them who made the Roman Empire what it was while everyone else watched. Not a bit of it. The Romans were very clever at what they did. They turned being Roman into an idea, a way of life, that anyone could have – under certain conditions of course, like being prepared to accept the emperor's authority without question. The fact is that millions of people did just that. They adopted Roman names, lived the Roman way, and they did that wherever they lived. There were Syrian Romans, North African Romans, Spanish Romans, and British Romans.

I can't pretend I don't think the Romans were brilliant, but that's not the same as thinking they were all good, and I'd like to think I've acknowledged the downside to Roman life. After all, it's difficult to defend the horrors of the amphitheatre, slavery, or the brutal massacre of innocent civilians during the wars of conquest. This book is undoubtedly my spin on the Roman world, but I've tried to give a balanced account, both the good and the bad.

It also goes without saying I've had to leave a lot out, so I chose the key events and people that made Rome what it was, those things that reflect what the Roman Empire and being Roman mean to us. Of course, the events related are entirely my choice, which you might not agree with, but that's always been the historian's luxury.

Foolish Assumptions

In writing this book, I've had to make a few assumptions about you:

- ✓ You have a vague idea about the Romans from school.
- ✓ You've probably been dragged to one or two Roman places on holiday.

- ✔ You basically thought the Romans came from Rome.
- ✔ You love the idea of reading history packed with murderers, megalomaniacs, mayhem, corruption, swindles, decadence, heroic valour, and crazy weirdo gods.

How This Book Is Organised

I could very easily have started at the beginning of Roman history and written about nothing thing else until I stopped, but where's the fun in that? The Roman Empire was an ancient civilisation, full of exciting events and interesting people. In this book, you get the best of both worlds: Information about what it meant to be Roman *and* a rundown of Roman history. The following sections show you what you can expect to find in each part.

Part I: Romans – The Big Boys of the Ancient World

The first part is all about putting the Romans into context. The Romans might be popular today, but in fact they've been pretty popular ever since ancient times. Many rulers and governments along the way spotted that the Romans were good at being in charge. This part introduces you to how and why the Romans have had such an impact on later civilisations and the legacy of some of their ideas. Of course, Romans weren't just armour-clad brutes. The Romans kept their world together through a mixture of the sword and a straightforward acceptance of the structure of their society and its laws. Part I also examines Roman society: the class system, from senator to slave; the Roman fantasy about their identity; the sheer hard practicalities of being in the army; and more. Unlike almost all other ancient civilisations in the western world, the Romans really got a handle on creating a system that actually worked, even if the man in charge was sometimes a raving lunatic.

Part II: Living The Good Life

This bit is all about daily life as a Roman in the Roman Empire. This part includes lots of things that you'll have heard of, like gladiators in the Colosseum, chariot-racing, and roads. But there's loads more besides, and the idea is that this part explains how people in the Roman Empire enjoyed themselves, how they got around, where and how they lived, and the gods they prayed to in the hope that they'd be protected from all the nasty things that nature could throw at them. It's also got a bit about the Roman economy – no, not pie charts and statistics – but the international marketplace the Romans created for themselves.

Part III: The Rise of Rome

Rome was once just one of thousands of nondescript villages in Italy, so it seems almost impossible to understand how just one of them could have become so powerful. Needless to say, it didn't happen overnight. Like many great success stories, the Roman Empire had a very rocky ride to begin with. Not only that, it also started submerged in the misty obscurity of ancient legends. This part takes you from the very earliest beginnings through the succession of wars and struggles that gradually won the Romans control of Italy. Naturally, no-one gets that powerful without others noticing, and this part also discusses the first major international wars, such as the Punic Wars when the Romans beat the Carthaginians. By the end of this part, the Romans are the most powerful people in ancient Europe, poised on the brink of total domination of the Mediterranean.

Part IV: When Romans Ruled the World

Power corrupts – we all know that – and it also breeds a sense of injustice. This part starts off with the massive struggle and crisis of the late Roman Republic when a succession of military leaders like Marius, Pompey, and Julius Caesar jockeyed for power in a conflict that climaxed in a civil war. The outcome was the Roman Empire, when for the first time one man ruled the whole show: Augustus.

Of course, nothing is ever straightforward, and the story takes us through the shenanigans of the Twelve Caesars of the first century AD and the reigns of maniacs like Caligula and Nero, with occasional bouts of sanity under the rule of Vespasian and Titus. Despite the internal problems, this was the time when the power of the Romans extended over more area than ever before. The last bit is the brilliant success of the 'Five Good Emperors' of the second century when the system worked, and it was once said this was the happiest time in human history.

Part V: Throwing the Empire Away

It's tragic, isn't it? Just when human beings start to get something right, they have to ruin it. In a way, it wasn't the Romans' fault. Other people wanted a slice of the action and wanted to invade the Empire. Unfortunately, the Roman Empire was now so big that governing and defending it was almost impossible. So Part V is all about how it started to go horribly wrong. The Romans didn't help, though, because they had a succession of military adventurers, thugs, and lunatics for rulers, most of whom died a violent death after short, turbulent reigns. But in the fourth century emperors like