

Roman Education

By L.A. Curchin

Roman boys and girls began their formal education around the age of 6 or 7 at the *ludus* (primary school). (Prior to this age, they were taught in the home by their mother or by slaves.) The children were accompanied to school by a slave known as a *paedagogus*, who also acted as a tutor and supervised their homework. Schools might be located either in a building, or out-of-doors. Lessons in primary school were devoted mostly to reading and writing; the children practised by writing in sand or on wax-coated wooden tablets. They began by learning the alphabet, then forming syllables, then words and sentences, and eventually reading stories. Discipline was very strict and the cane was used frequently; the poet Horace later recalled that his teacher, Orbilius, was very fond of the whip. Quintilian, an educator in the first century AD, disapproved of corporal punishment, which suggests that it was still rampant in his day.

At about age 12, the pupils progressed to a grammar school, where they came under the charge of a *grammaticus* or grammar teacher. Here they studied literature in considerable detail; particular stress was laid on model authors such as Cicero, Vergil and Livy. Teachers were notoriously underpaid and had to solicit funds from the children's parents. This presupposes that the poor could not afford much education for their children. Eventually, however, public salaries for teachers were introduced.

Girls seldom progressed beyond this point, but remained at home to be trained in the domestic arts in preparation for marriage; most of them married while in their teens. Boys who completed grammar school might progress, around the age of 16, to the school of a *rhetor* or teacher of rhetoric. Here they would learn to give speeches and to participate in debates. This sort of training was clearly designed for potential politicians and lawyers, so the student body was presumably upper-class; boys from poorer families would already be in the work

force. Debating exercises involved arguing both sides of a made-up situation; the situations were often quite implausible, involving people being kidnapped by pirates, or parents poisoning their children. Several Roman authors ridicule these school exercises as unrealistic and irrelevant to the sorts of cases a lawyer might actually encounter. As Seneca complains, "we learn for school, not for life." Part of the rhetorical training involved making-up speeches and letters which might have been spoken by an historical character in a given situation. When we read in an historian like Livy a speech attributed to Romulus or Hannibal, we have to remember that such speeches are sheer fabrication by the historian, based on his school training, to set the mood and show what these characters *might* have said.

The rhetorical curriculum also included Greek, the language of culture and philosophy. Educated men were expected to be able to speak Greek, and Greek words are often used by Roman writers to express concepts for which there was no easy Latin equivalent, just as we occasionally use French phrases today. In the western half of the Empire, Greek was a "second language"; in the east, which had been conquered long before by Alexander the Great, Greek was far more prominent than Latin. Native languages, the speech of the pre-Roman inhabitants of the various provinces, were not taught in schools, though they were still spoken in the street, even in the Late Empire.

Those who were really ambitious could go to university, where they could specialize in philosophy, medicine or oratory. Already in the Late Republic, aristocratic young Romans - Cicero's son, for example - went to Athens to complete their education at the philosophy schools, and here the world's first university was established in the second century AD. New universities sprang up at Rome, Alexandria, Carthage, and elsewhere. In the Late Empire the universities became havens of paganism; the university of Athens was finally shut down in the sixth century.

I should also say something here about books and libraries. Until the 4th c. AD, when the use of vellum or animal skin was introduced, the Romans wrote their literature on *papyrus*, the predecessor of paper, using a reed pen, and ink made from resin and soot. Papyrus is a plant that grows along the river Nile, in Egypt. The interior of the papyrus stalk contains fibres of varying grades, from which different weights of paper were produced. The papyrus was first soaked in water, then strips of it were laid out in vertical rows on a board. Further strips were laid horizontally over these, and the two layers were then squeezed together in a press and dried in the sun to produce a sheet of paper. Up to 20 sheets would then be joined together to make a long roll or *volumen*, from which we derive our English word 'volume' for a book. Each *volumen* was mounted on wooden rollers, with a tag attached to identify the contents. There were no pages to turn; the book was just a long scroll.

Since papyrus was valuable, you would not throw away a book or document that was no longer needed. Instead, you would erase or bleach out the writing on it, and use it again. Such a recycled papyrus was known as a *palimpsest*.

Rich Romans might have private libraries. Several of the generals who conquered the eastern provinces in the last two centuries BC brought back books confiscated from the libraries of oriental monarchs. While in Egypt, Julius Caesar may have seen the Library of Alexandria, which held 700,000 volumes. Before his death, Caesar commissioned the eminent scholar Varro to gather books for a public library at Rome. The first public library was finally opened in 39 BC on the Palatine Hill. Subsequently Augustus built two larger libraries, housing both Greek and Latin works. One of these was destroyed by fire in the late 1st c. AD, but the other, on the Palatine, survived until the 4th c AD. The emperor Trajan later opened a library in his new forum, with Greek and Latin books in two buildings separated by Trajan's Column, a pictorial history of the Dacian wars. Since Roman

books were scrolls and could not stand upright, they were stored in cupboards rather than on bookshelves.

By the Late Empire, there were nearly 30 public libraries at Rome, and libraries in other cities as well. The emperor Hadrian, for instance, built a famous library at Athens, part of which (minus the books of course) is still standing.