



In A.D. 1, the emperor Augustus (here, at a banquet with his wife Livia) was Rome's "it" guy.

OTTAVIO

THE YEAR



LIVIA

ONE

Life was nasty, brutish, and short 2,000 years ago, but the issues of the day were surprisingly modern • BY LEWIS LORD

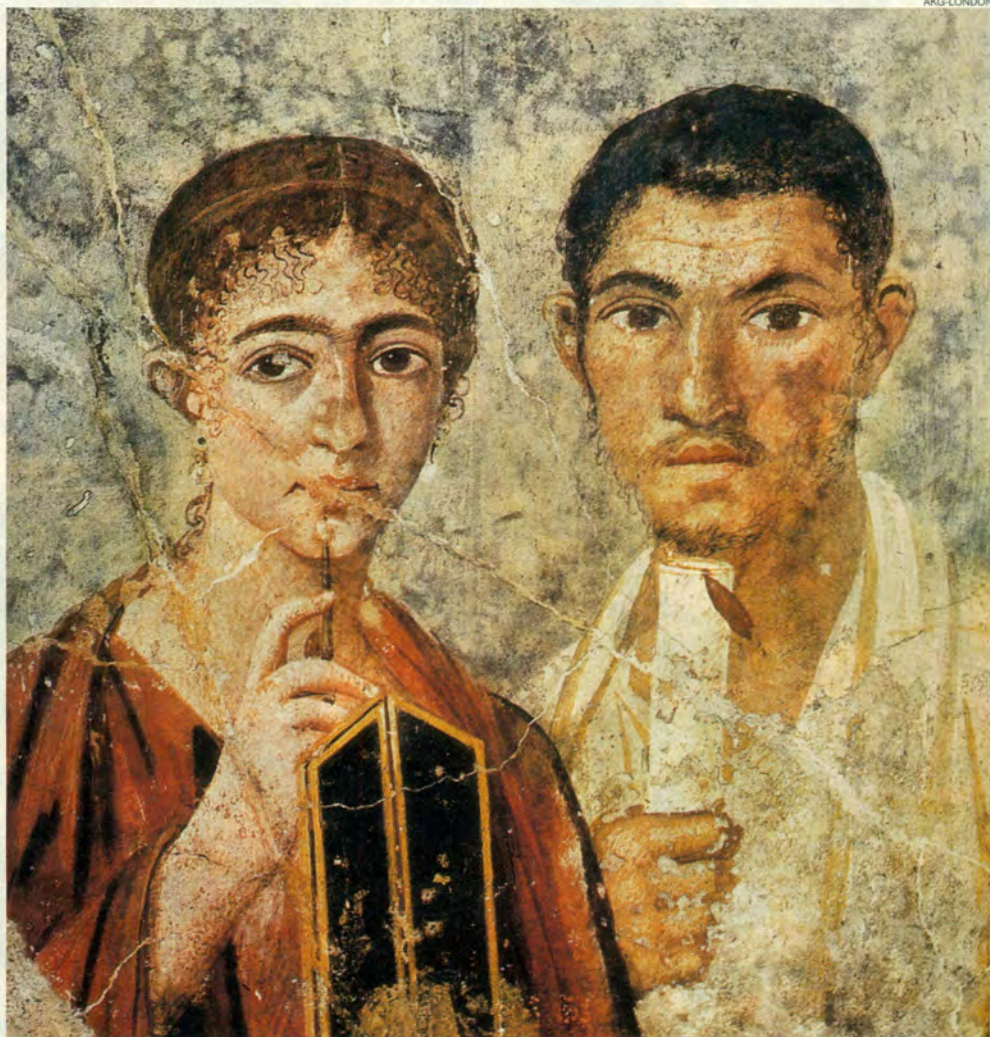
Two thousand years ago this week, the Year One arrived. But no one knew it, either then or for several centuries thereafter. The 12 months we call A.D. 1 came and went as just another year. To the Romans who ruled what was considered the civilized world—and whose civilization would one day be the basis for our own—the year was 754 A.U.C. (*ab urbe condita*—“from the foundation of the city”)—754 being the number of years since Romulus and Remus, the legendary orphans suckled by a she-wolf, were said to have founded Rome. Among Rome’s Greek subjects, who marked time in four-year units between Olympic

Games, the year was merely the first quarter of the 195th Olympiad. Meanwhile, the Chinese saw it as nothing more than “the second year of the reign period of P’ing-ti,” the boy emperor who would die five years later at the age of 13.

But to a sixth-century monk in Rome, the year ranked as the greatest in all history. According to Dionysius Exiguus’s reckonings, it was “Anno Domini”—the first full “year of our Lord”—the year that began a week after the birth of Christ. All time prior to A.D. 1 would be counted as so many years B.C., “before Christ.” With papal support, Dionysius’s chronological system gradually won almost universal acceptance—even though it miscalculated the Nativity by several years: Scholars believe that Jesus was probably 5, 6, or 7 years old in A.D. 1.

Now and then. The people of the Year One shared concerns that exist today—child rearing, social behavior, faith—but did so in ways now impossible to understand. Historian John Evans tells his first-year students at the University of Minnesota they would find it easier to “deal with a star-faring race that showed up from Betelgeuse than to cross the divides of time and space and deal with the Romans on their own terms.”

In the political world of 2,000 years ago, Ronald Reagan would never have made it in politics. Romans ranked actors on a level with prostitutes. Nor would Al Gore have won support by kissing Tipper. Men in love were considered laughable, so much so that one senator was stripped of his seat for embracing his wife in public. But George W. Bush would have stood tall. In Rome, every “young nobleman” was dutybound “to avenge any humiliations suffered by his father,” wrote historian Florence Dupont in her book *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*. “Not to be avenged was the worst misfortune



AKG-LONDON

{ LOVE, ROMAN STYLE }

Men and women married young: Girls were deemed ready at 12 and boys at 14. Augustus penalized men still single at 25 and women at 20. Engagements were sealed with an iron ring placed on the bride’s third finger. Wedding parties started with the sacrifice of a pig, followed by cake. Amid dirty songs, the couple left for their new home, where the bride greased the door posts before being carried across the threshold.

that could befall a father and the deepest shame that could sully a son’s name.”

In the Year One, the world’s most powerful politician—a man who unintentionally paved the way for Christianity’s rise—was a 63-year-old, 5-foot-5 hypochondriac with gallstones, dirty teeth, and a knack for climbing to the top and staying there. The emperor Augustus, grandnephew and adopted son of the murdered Julius Caesar, was in the 27th year of his 41-year reign as the unquestioned leader of the world’s biggest empire.

Those years found Augustus pondering very modern issues: law and order, welfare, family values, and moral decay, including sexual transgressions in his own household. Augustus would boast that he found Rome brick and made it marble, but more lasting by far than his monuments was the influence of his reign, which helped shape life and thought in much of the world for the next 2,000 years. The Age of Augustus would create a framework of government and society that

unworkable republic and its freedoms for the security and efficiency of an imperial dictatorship. Beneath the grandeur of empire lay a decaying social system peopled overwhelmingly by the poor and the left out. It was there that Christianity, offering hope in a hopeless world, would take root, grow, and eventually flower.

Indeed, the teachings of Christ were spread in a world of unrelenting cruelty. Who today could condone the sight of men and women being fed to beasts as people

of all classes shrilled their delight? To the Romans, the spectacle was a just punishment for lawbreakers. What's to be made of a superpower that conquered cities by enslaving the men and killing the women and children? Owning or killing people, Romans believed, was as natural as water running downhill. Who can comprehend a father's tossing an infant into the village dung heap for being female, sick, or a surplus mouth to feed? The Romans were not offended, especially if the father followed the law and invited five neighbors to examine the baby before he left it to die.

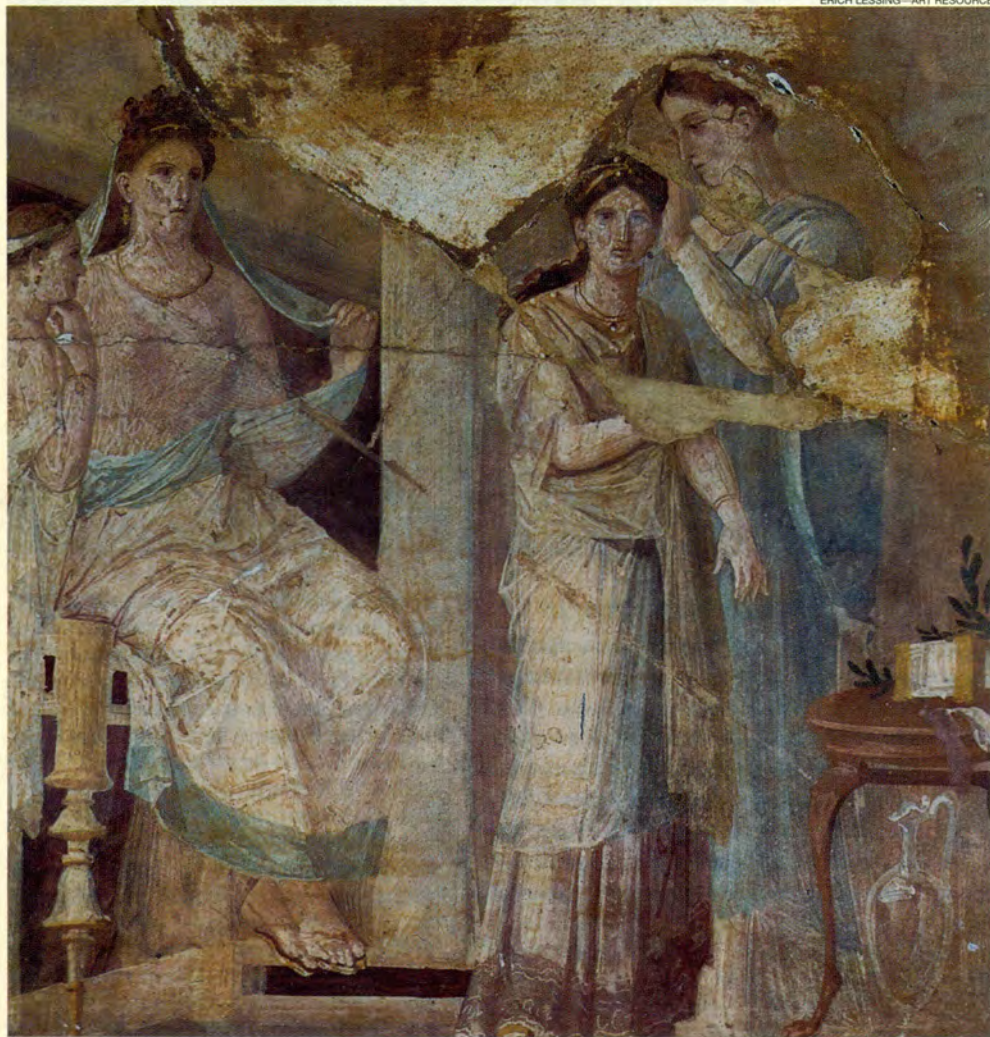
Why not? In the Year One, questioning such behavior would have drawn blank stares. "The Romans saw the world as it was," says Sarah Pomeroy, a classics professor at New York's Hunter College who wrote *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. "They didn't think of whether anything was unjust."

In the world of the Romans, the cure for stomachache was a dose of water in which feet had been washed. Hawkers in the town squares offered amulets conferring power from gods for every need, from giving sight to the blind to raising a child (among the baby gods: Wailer, Breastfeeder, Eater, and Stander). Children, until they walked and talked, were not considered humans. Citizens didn't use soap but cleansed themselves with olive oil and a scraping tool. A stick with a wet sponge on the tip did what toilet paper does today. (Indeed, paper as we know it did not exist until a hundred years later in China.)

Centuries of rough existence had bred a Roman acceptance of savagery and the conviction that life was a series of bleak choices. How, for instance, might a poor family acquire a slave? If it had food to spare, it could pluck a child from the dung heap and raise it in servitude. "Nothing was wasted in the

ancient world: not an abandoned baby, not the cloth that kept the ragpicker in business . . . not even the grains of barley in horse manure on the streets," writes Yale historian Ramsay MacMullen in his book *Roman Social Relations, 50 B.C. to A.D. 284*. "There were always people poor enough to fight over another's leavings."

Political and social influence was reserved for a tiny group: the senators and knights who owned most of the land and the bulk of the wealth. By one estimate, these elites—essentially the guys in togas



ERICH LESSING—ART RESOURCE

would transform Western Europe—and hence America—with Rome's laws, its institutions, its language, and what eventually would become its state religion, Christianity.

Without the good roads and widespread order of the Pax Romana—the two centuries of peace that Augustus introduced—the "good news" of Christ might never have spread. Yet the stability was wafer-thin. In the decades just before A.D. 1, Augustus had conned the Roman people into scrapping their cherished but ultimately

{ MASTER AND SLAVE }

The well-to-do—like these Pompeians, with their slave hairdresser—employed dozens of slaves as household servants. Slaves were constantly at the side of the master or mistress of the house, ready to dress them, hold their mirrors, brush their hair, scrape their backs, and accompany them wherever they went. Without slaves, historian M. I. Finley observed, Romans "could not imagine a civilized existence to be possible."

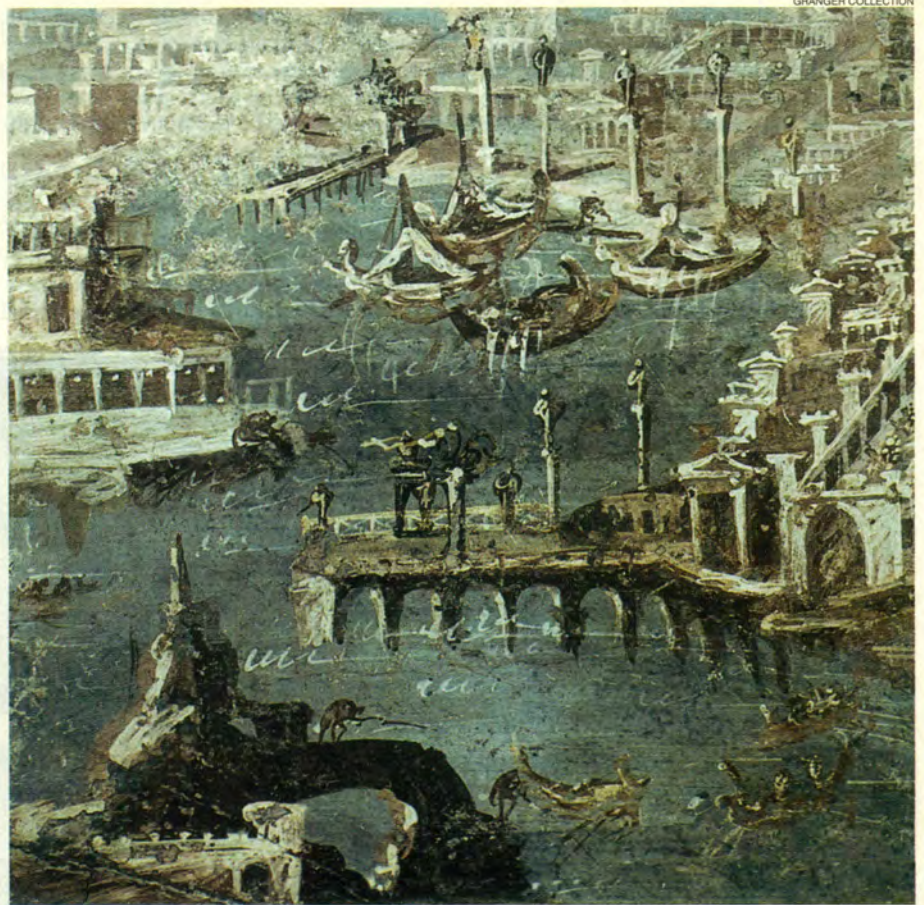
in the Hollywood epics—made up less than one tenth of 1 percent of the population. Rome's upper-middle class—prosperous but not immensely rich—ranked socially only a notch above the vast citizenry that was poor. Many of the not-rich-enough contented themselves with a few well-cultivated acres where, amid kin and slaves, they lived relatively comfortable lives, going barefoot, sleeping on straw, and eating pork, vegetables, and bread.

The colossally rich, like the patrician who gave his pet eel a jeweled bracelet, retained their unsalaried political offices by treating supporters to gigantic parties. But in the century leading up to the Year One, fewer and fewer politicians could afford the soaring costs of feasts, theater shows, and gladiatorial combats that the public had come to expect. Many officeholders turned to bribes. By the first century A.D., venality was rampant. Even officers in the army expected payoffs from their soldiers.

Home and away. The Romans had a propensity for rewarding the wrong people. In the two centuries before the Year One, a long series of wars kept untold thousands of farmers in the army and away from their farms. To prevent their families from starving, many soldiers sold their neglected land to rich landowners. Once out of the legions, multitudes sought refuge in Rome, swelling the city's population in A.D. 1 to nearly 1 million people. It wasn't a promise of good jobs that drew the dispossessed veterans to Rome, however. Slaves did nearly all the work, not just the menial but also such important tasks as operating stores, delivering mail, practicing medicine, and tutoring the children of the wealthy. What pulled the ex-soldiers to Rome was "bread and circuses," specifically free food and free entertainment financed by taxes and tributes from conquered territories.

The government, since Caesar's rule, had given daily wheat rations to most citizens of Rome, the plebeians who included all adults except foreigners, slaves, and women. Even farmers who still owned land were abandoning it and flocking to the city to live on the dole. Rome's elites scorned the newcomers as rabble—"the blood-suckers of the treasury," Cicero called them—and Caesar tried belatedly to curb the giveaway. But his welfare reform was short-lived. Augustus, Caesar's successor, reversed the cuts in 5 B.C. and extended the benefits to boys as well as men.

In the Year One, to keep his citizenry happy and grievance-free, Augustus was delivering a lavish



{ WORLDLY ROMANS }

To feed itself, Rome relied on its empire, which stretched from the English Channel to North Africa and from Syria to Spain. The Romans built deep-water harbors like this one to get wheat from Egypt and Sicily, wine from Spain, and olive oil from Africa. One observer reported that Rome "seems like a common warehouse of the world . . . The arrival and departure of ships never ceases."

array of religious ceremonies, festivals, and *ludi*, "the games in honor of the gods." Chariot races drew crowds of 200,000 or more to the Circus Maximus, where the most popular scene—a mass littering of overturned chariots, squealing horses, and maimed men—was known as a "shipwreck." A day at the Forum often began with fans savoring Augustus's wild-beast matches, although the regulars had a good idea which animals would win. Packs of hounds always beat herds of deer, bears withstood bulls, and lions usually finished off tigers. But not even the ferocious charge of the rhinoceros could penetrate the thick hide of the elephant.

The afternoon brought more variety: animals vs. humans. Some of the men, trained and equipped with spears, lived to fight another day. But for others, the outcome was never in doubt. They were the *bestiarii*—condemned criminals who later would include Christian men and women—thrown into the arena with no training and no weapons. The carnivore often was a quick-killing lion; many fans preferred smaller beasts



Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *The Year One*



that did more dragging and tearing.

By the Year One, the *ludi* were part of everyday Roman life. "One might even say that they pervaded life," wrote the French historian Roland Auguet in *Cruelty and Civilization: The Roman Games*. "They imposed their rhythm on existence and provided nourishment for the passions." Augustus, ever a stickler for order, tried to regulate the gore. If two gladiators still stood after dueling long and hard, he decreed, both should receive the palm of victory. But the mob preferred blood. For centuries, *ludi* sponsors would ignore Augustus's law and force the faceless men—helmets hid their features—to fight until one became a corpse in the sand.

A decree telling spectators where to sit was part of Augustus's most ambitious project, his campaign to restore public morality. The best seats went to patrician couples, the Vestal Virgins, soldiers, and married men. Why favor married men? Augustus had the notion that Rome's population was shrinking because too many men were visiting prostitutes, keeping concubines, and avoiding marriage. If more men would take wives, he believed, Rome would have what Cicero termed "less lust and larger families."

To promote family values, Augustus

{ GORE TRIUMPHANT }

In a single season, Augustus financed spectacles that saw as many as 10,000 gladiators fighting—and many dying. He built a lake for a battle involving 30 ships and 3,000 combatants. In his wild-beast shows, 3,500 animals perished, including elephants and rhinoceroses. "Let us go back to Rome," one fan wrote from abroad. "It might be rather nice, too, to see somebody killed."

hatched a system of rewards and punishments. Husbands who fathered three children were put on fast tracks for promotions. Mothers of three won a voice in property questions. Bachelors and spinsters, on the other hand, saw their inheritances restricted. Scrapped was an old law that let husbands kill adulterous wives. But any man who refused to divorce such a woman, the emperor decreed, should be prosecuted. Wives could divorce their husbands, but at a risk: Fathers apparently always got the children.

The men of Rome had griped about their women for nearly two centuries, ever since the Senate agreed in 195 B.C. to let ladies wear dyed clothes and ride in carriages. Wives were expected to keep the hearth

burning, fetch water, cook, spin, weave, and bear children. They weren't supposed to drink—a sure sign of sexual aberrations. (The reason men kissed their female kin, Cato the Elder reported, was to check for wine on their breath.) Nor, in the presence of males, were they to appear very smart. Wives who discussed history and poetry and used correct grammar, the writer Juvenal observed, were "really annoying."

No romance. Romans married for duty, specifically to preserve family lines and replenish the citizenry. Fathers decided who wed whom. Until Augustus decreed that engaged girls be at least 10, some Roman daughters, including his own, were betrothed in infancy. Teenage boys, like their fathers, could have their way with prostitutes or slaves of either sex. But first-time brides were expected to be virgins. One of Julius Caesar's wives no doubt passed the test: She was only 11. Affection was rarely a factor in Roman engagements. "But it was taken for granted that if the husband and wife treated each other properly, love would develop and emerge, and by the end of their lives it would be a deep, mutual feeling," says David Konstan, a classics professor at Brown University.

Few people, ancient or modern, made a bigger mess of family life than did the family-values leader of Rome. Augustus ditched his first wife, Scribonia, because of a "moral perversion of hers," namely her contempt for his mistress. A year later, the randy emperor fell for Livia, who happened to be six months pregnant and married to another man. Three days after the baby arrived, Augustus and Livia wed. Livia's freshly divorced husband, posing as her father, obligingly gave her away.

Livia kept Augustus content, critics would claim, by sending slave girls to his chamber and looking the other way as he dallied with politicians' wives. Whatever the cause, the emperor would ultimately laud his marriage as 51 years of happiness. But his opinion of his only child, Julia, was less felicitous.

Julia was born just before Augustus divorced her mother, the strait-laced Scribonia. As a newborn, she was betrothed to a son of her father's ally, Mark Antony. When friend turned foe, Augustus had her young fiancé killed. When she was 14, Augustus wed her to his nephew Marcellus, who would die two years later. She then married another cousin's husband, Agrippa, and consequently gave Augustus four grandchildren. But the emperor was not satisfied. When Agrippa died, Augustus matched Julia with Livia's son Tiberius, even though Tiberius was happily married to someone else.

The result was the greatest sex scandal of the Augustan Age. Tiberius, craving the

wife he was forced to divorce, withdrew to an island and brooded. The abandoned Julia, meanwhile, took her first stab at enjoying life on her terms. She had lovers—not just a few, it was said, but many. She got drunk in revels at the Forum, informants reported, and offered herself as a prostitute on the street.

In 2 B.C., word of his daughter's transgressions reached Augustus. In a blaze of publicity, he terminated Julia's marriage, wrote the Senate a letter detailing her alleged debaucheries, and banished her, at 37, to an island in the Tyrrhenian Sea.

Ten years later, an identical charge hit Julia's daughter, also named Julia, and she, too, was sent into exile. For good measure, Augustus struck back at one perceived cause of his progeny's lax morals. The emperor had long endured the poems of Ovid, whose *Art of Love* seduction manual flew in the face of the official family-values campaign. For corrupting his kin, the monarch expelled Rome's most popular poet to a Black Sea town so backward that men wore trousers.

Slippery slope. Augustus never understood that a force far more pervasive than Ovid's poems was fueling Rome's moral slide. It was wealth that rotted out the Roman character. With trade and tribute pouring in from the provinces, the rich grew richer, lazier, and more indulgent. Nor did the doles and free spectacles strengthen the moral fiber of the city's idle mob. As time went on, the disparities be-

tween the rich and the wretched widened in every respect. Housing costs in the cities soared, chasing the impoverished into attics and one-room hovels with no water and no hearth. In the countryside, land increasingly fell into the hands of a few patrician families that now owned thousands of acres tended by hundreds of disinherited, indigent workers.

By the third century A.D., to meet the rising costs of defending its frontier, Rome was soaking the poor. The Romans never imagined anything like today's graduated income tax, which places the heaviest burden on those best able to bear it. Rome's system was the opposite: The richer and more politically connected a man was, the less he paid.

The fifth-century collapse of the empire that began just before the Year One had many perceived causes, from exhaustion of topsoil to poisonous lead in the pipes of an otherwise splendid plumbing system. No claim has been more controversial than Edward Gibbon's. His five-volume *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-88) blamed Christianity, asserting that it had wrecked the old religions that had sustained the Roman soul and stabilized the Roman state. But Will Durant, the 20th-century philosopher, noted that the old religions were breaking up long before Jesus was born. Romans lost faith in their leaders, Durant wrote in *Caesar and Christ*, "because the state defended wealth against poverty, fought to capture slaves,



AROUND THE WORLD

Meanwhile, in other lands...

Not all roads led to Rome in A.D. 1. Though he never saw it, China's Han dynasty would have humbled even Augustus: A detailed census taken in A.D. 2 counted nearly 60 million souls under the emperor's rule, protected from northern barbarians by a garrisoned wall stretching hundreds of miles.

At the heart of Han power was trade, with far-reaching and well-regulated routes on sea and land. Silk, along with other manufactured goods like lacquer boxes and iron, tied the empire to almost every corner of the ancient



Figures playing the game Liubo from China's Han Dynasty

world, as trade pulsed along the route travelers today still call the Silk Road. (The secrets of cultivating the silk-worm were closely guarded by the imperial government.) Goods moved from the Chinese heartland east to the islands of Japan, south to the kingdoms of India, and west all the way to Rome. To keep

track of this trade and manage the rest of the empire, the Han refined what was to become their most lasting legacy: bureaucracy. A rigid hierarchy of provincial and local officials reported to the emperor; a wide-ranging network of roads with special lanes reserved for official use and a sophisticated post sys-

tem kept them in touch with the capital. Officials studied administration, Confucianism, and archery at a national university that taught as many as 30,000 students at once. They wrote on silk or wood, though in the Year One the invention of paper was just a few decades away.

Strong Han. The Han's success in controlling such a huge empire left such an impact on the Chinese that they still call themselves "people of Han" today. The Han gave "recognizable shape . . . to the culture, social structure, political system, and economy of China," historians Joseph Levenson and Franz Schurmann write. ". . . It was the political system of Han that gave China its unique stamp."

Already vast, the Han seem to have been less interested in



{ A FEW GOOD VIRGINS }

Elite families proposed preadolescent daughters for 30-year jobs as Vestal Virgins—seen here as statues in Rome’s Forum—who kept the Temple of Vesta’s fire burning. The perks were excellent: posh parties, meals of sow’s udders and thrushes, and prime seats at gladiatorial shows. But the risks were great for some: Lose your virginity, and you’d be buried alive.

taxed toil to support luxury, and failed to protect its people from famine, pestilence, invasion, and destitution.”

As for the spread of Christianity—now the world’s largest religion with roughly 1 billion followers—sources from antiquity suggest an important role by the emperor who reigned during Jesus’s childhood. Thanks to Augustus’s Pax Romana, Christ’s revolutionary message was able to spread from one generation to the next in a world made stable by the hegemony of Rome, developing, as the apostle Paul described it, “in the fullness of time.”

“A peace was prevalent which began at the birth of Christ,” the Christian teacher Origen wrote in the second century. “For God prepared the nations for his teaching so that they should be under one prince, the king of the Romans, and that it might not . . . be more difficult for the apostles to carry out the task laid on them by their Master when he said, ‘Go and teach all nations.’” ●

expansion than the Romans. The Chinese fought constantly with northern nomads and despite military campaigns and diplomatic efforts never managed to consolidate control over the Central Asian merchant kingdoms, preventing any substantive direct links between the Han and Rome. Still, profits on the Silk Road flowed in one direction: east. With nothing much to offer the Chinese in the way of trade goods, Rome paid dearly for its indulgence in silk. Pliny the Elder, writing in the first century A.D., estimated Rome paid 100 million sesterces (or 22,000 gold pounds) for its imports from the east.

The Han legacy, like that of the Romans, is still visible today. Not all the peoples of the Year One were as lucky.

On the other side of the world, an empire was forming that would dominate Central America for seven centuries—and then virtually vanish.

The pyramids of Teotihuacán still tower over the valley floor near modern-day Mexico City. These massive structures are remnants of a thriving metropolis that once

housed as many as 200,000 people, making it one of the largest cities in the world at its peak in the fifth century A.D.

City living. Building Teotihuacán meant gathering the valley’s population into one place, a rarity in the ancient world. “It lasted 700 years and never happened again,” says Columbia University

Teotihuacán scholar Esther Pasztory. “It’s more practical for people to live dispersed, especially in preindustrial society.” Though the city’s setup was less efficient for farming, organization enabled the city to become a trading powerhouse. The city’s workshops turned out millions of blades and scrapers crafted from

green volcanic glass. Thriving exports, perhaps facilitated by foreign delegations living in the city, spread Teotihuacán’s distinctive obsidian tools and pottery all over Central America.

But today, much about Teotihuacán remains mysterious. There are no written records and no accounting for the city’s collapse. Around A.D. 700, some sort of political conflict broke out, and the population slowly dispersed over several decades. By the time of the Aztecs seven centuries later, the abandoned city’s origins were shrouded in myth. Even the city’s original name was lost; Teotihuacán is Aztec for “City of the Gods,” Pasztory says, because “the Aztecs thought it was so impressive only the gods could have made it.” —Andrew Curry



A.D. 1 funerary mask found in Colombia