



# SPIRITUAL VALUES OF ROMAN CULTURE DURING PAX ROMANA (27 BC–180)

Le Vu Truong Giang\*

University of Sciences, Hue University, 77 Nguyen Hue St., Hue, Vietnam

**Abstract.** The Pax Romana was the golden age of ancient Roman culture since the birth of Rome until its division into Eastern and Western Empire in 180. Within two centuries, under the principate regime, the Romans continued to promote cultural values that they selectively inherited from the past, especially the ancient Greek culture. All cultural values, both tangible and intangible, constructed under the early dynasties from Augustus, reflect the boosting of Rome in all dimensions of its development. Roman arts, literature, history, science, and philosophy during the Pax Romana have profound effects on Western culture afterward. The legacies of the spiritual values of Roman culture can be seen in all aspects of social and cultural life. This article analyzes and assesses the spiritual values of Roman culture created during the Pax Romana.

**Keywords:** *Pax Romana, cultural values, Roman Empire, Stoicism*

## 1. Poetry and poets in the social-political relationship

Roman literature originated from economic prosperity and the triumph of wars. The more boundaries the Romans extended, the more opportunities they had for exchanging and learning with other literature. When attacking Greece, they received the world of a “literary giant” next to them. The Romans explore Greece through schools and books, in which literature did not reflect the era but only follow to Homère and Greek dramatists. Nguyen Manh Tuong claimed: “*The origination of ancient Roman literature was the result of assimilating civilizations in Italy, which was Hellenized long ago.*” And he also considered the early Roman poetry: “*the content of Greek poetry, dressed in Roman clothes and felt in Latin character*” [8; 63]. Therefore, in the early days, Roman literature inherited and imitated Greek literature but later established a separate path with the achievements of expressing Roman spirit, not separated from the environment of real social life and the patronage of literary activities. Roman literature includes many genres such as epic, lyric poetry, satirical poetry, prose, drama, etc. with leading authors such as Plautus in comedy, Lucretius in scientific poetry, Ovid in lyric poetry, and Virgil in epics.

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\* Corresponding: lechauphu88@gmail.com

Roman literature is characterized by asserting the norms of a pragmatic culture: the perfection of practical people of the community, the building of a mighty nation, and the organization and development of an orderly society. It also interprets and analyzes the natural world, the social environment, and the problems of life. At the same time, Roman literature also expresses human moods, which address the questions of social reality.

In the early Pax Romana, Augustus, the Emperor of Rome, greatly respected poetry and broadly sponsored literary artists. Many famous poets emerged during this period, and among them was Virgil (70–19 BC). Virgil was probably the greatest poet of Rome. He was later honored as a legendary figure, a sage and a prophet. Virgil came from a plebeian family in the Po river valley. He passionately studied philosophy and contacted with literary theory, the poetics of Greek poets who belonged to the Alexandrie branch such as Théocrite and Callimaque. Virgil reached glory when alive. Virgil began to compose short poems called *Culex*, acquainted with many famous contemporary poets. Later, he wrote his most famous epics.

His first famous work is *Songs of the Breeders*, followed by *Agriculture poetry* (Géorgiques). The latter was composed to praise the agricultural development of Rome. It can be seen as a cheer when people of Rome could put the blade aside after the long battles to take a plow as a signal of a peaceful and stable society. Virgil discussed the issues of economics, politics, and religion and proposes the resolution for contradictions between urban and rural, between Roman culture and Romanized alien culture. Virgil also highly praised Augustus – the Emperor of Rome: “Dear god of the country! Please do not interrupt the young man’s walk in restoring the country! For a long time, the heaven was jealous of the earth and cautioned Caesar that he interested over his fame” [6;125].

Virgil emphasized nationality, seeing Rome as a united, undisclosed homeland, even though they occupied most of the other land outside the Italian peninsula: “Italy was born a hero genre, who belongs to Marseille, Sabins. There are Ligure people who don’t know tiredness; there are Volsque people with them “spears are always in hand”. In Italy were born many heroes, Decius, Marius, Cammille who are all famous; the Sipion battle, the great Ceasar has won the battle on the distant border of Asia. Far from the Roman realm, Indians trembled before the strength of Italy.6;125].

Another important concern with Virgil’s work is the relationship between politics and culture. Today’s relationship is often seen as a contrasting and fundamental contradiction, which means the existence of one might undermine other; both are separate and unable to be conciliated. The talent has overwhelmed content, topics, and evidence, by which Virgil produced masterpieces on the hard topics.

Virgil's most prominent works including epic *Enéide*<sup>1</sup> and the other twelve books made him the brightest star among Roman poets. However, the people of Rome regarded it as an essence of literature and honored him as "the Roman Homer". Aeneas, the hero of Troy, is not only an embodiment of a country, a nation but also a faith, a hope, and a representative of the will of Roman people. Virgil's *Aeneid* reflects all the above-mentioned ethic values of Rome. First of all, it is a wise intellect. Through the image of the character Enee, Rome people show up their noble spirit of bravery, responsibility, faith, and a sense of gratitude. The spirit of bravery, responsibility, trust, and attitude of sensitive life all crystallized in an enthusiastically mental picture of the heroic *Enée*, in particular, and the ancient Roman people in general.

Another poet of the early Pax Romana is Ovid (43 BC–17). Ovid is famous for his lyric *Amores* and *Metamorphoses*. Ovid enjoyed the irony of everything, from the divine of marriage to those who made rich by war, even contemporary poets. He had a tragic end in exile, presumably while other poets praised Roman virtue. Ovid still wrote his own tendencies, touching many problems of society and most importantly disagreed with the heads.

In "*Amores*", he wrote:

*"For mighty wars I thought to tune my lute,*

*And make my measures to my subject suit.*

*Six feet for ev'ry verse the muse design'd,*

*But Cupid laughing, when he saw my mind,*

*From ev'ry second verse a foot purloin'd.*

*"Who gave thee, boy, this arbitrary sway,*

*On subjects, not thy own, commands to lay,*

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<sup>1</sup> The story has its content as follows: Troy was burned by Greek troops. Enee carries his dead body of the father, along with some survivors of Troy, and runs away. During the process of finding new land, the prince of Troy- Enee showed his bravery and qualities. The journey is met with great hardship. To Cactagio Enee was warmly welcomed by the queen Didon. The meeting sparked a flame of love in the lonely heart of widowed women Didon. But fate forced Enee to leave her to Italy to establish a new kingdom. In the torment, Didon committed suicide with a sword given by Enee. Enee went to Xixin and here, he buried his father. Then, thanks to a prophet who led the way, he went down the hell to meet his father and was told by his father that one of his descendants would create a golden age for the world and form one large empire. To Italy, Trois were welcomed by the Latin king and further promised to give his daughter Lavini to Enee. But before that Lavini was promised to give King Turnus, so the war between the Trois and the locals broke out. Enee results win.

*Who Phoebus only, and his laws obey?  
'Tis more absurd, than if the queen of love  
Should in Minerva's arms to battle move;  
Or manly Pallas from that queen should take  
Her torch, and o'er the dying lover shake.  
In fields as well may Cynthia sow the corn,  
Or Ceres wind in woods the bugle-horn;  
As well may Phoebus quit the trembling string,  
For sword and shield; and Mars may learn to sing.  
Already thy dominions are too large;  
Be not ambitious of a foreign charge.  
If thou wilt reign o'er all, and ev'ry where,  
The god of music for his harp may fear."*

Roman literature is centered on the desire to discover, to understand the natural world and the social life, asserting man as an ideal being. Thereby, it reveals the original worries and obsessions about the power of supernatural forces (environmental elements, natural disasters, especially, fate); threats of social disasters like war, hatred, and betray. At the same time, towards a humanistic aesthetically lively conception: Roman literature praises and reaches the beauty, the good; condemnation and exclusion from the ugly and the evil.

## **2. History praises the Roman Empire**

The Pax Romana witnessed extraordinary achievements in Rome's development. Many historians of the time recorded their time and studied the past of Rome. Many works are a valuable source of the world history. The authors are historians such as Tacitus and Suetonius.

Tacitus<sup>2</sup> (or Tacite) (56 / 57–120) is widely considered the most famous historian of Rome and all mankind. Tacitus was a son of a long-established ranger family, and he was trained in law. He took part in the government apparatus with the financial, legal, and even provincial authorities. During his office time, he began to compose poems and write some historical essays. The themes of his records concerned the truth and the justice between merit and guilt regardless of being rich or poor. All events were honestly recorded in his works. His most important contribution to historical science was his research methodology. His method was how to search historical sources to find facts and figures, study works by previous historians, and consult with historians and with those who had witnessed the events that Tacitus was concerned with. Not only was Tacitus famous for his historical works but also his poems. He composed highly praised poems at the time, but these works are almost lost. Only five of Tacitus' works are among the legacy of Rome and the world today. *Life of Agricola* (*De vita Iulii Agricolae*) and *Germania* (*De origine et situ*) were written in 98. *Life of Agricola* narrates the life and work of his father-in-law during his lifetime dwells in a general town in England. *Germania* is considered the first ethnographic work of Germania, later one of Rome's top opponents. *Dialogue between Orators* (*The Dialogus de Oratoribus*) written in 102 recorded the debate of Maternus Aper and Messala around the merits of poetry and rhetoric. *Historiae* (*History*) written in 105 and *Chronicles* (*Ab excessu divi Augusti*) in 117 are now considered the largest and most reliable historical sources of Rome and ancient Western civilization. *Chronicles* recorded the events that took place in 54 years, then *Historiae* recorded Roman history from the year 68 to 96. All political and social developments were totally and deeply described by Tacitus through his talent, wisdom, and intellect.

Historian *Suetonius* (69–122) belongs to the knight class. His most important work is a set of biographies of twelve successive Roman rulers, from Julius Caesar to Domitian. They were Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian. His eight books left to these days are the major sources of early Roman history in the Pax Romana. The works are probably written in the year 121 under Emperor Hadrian when Suetonius was the Emperor's private secretary. Suetonius rarely wrote historical chronicles. He wrote much of the governance, accomplishments, as well as the virtues and bad habits. Suetonius also wrote about everyday life in Rome, politics, the arts of speech, as well as the biographies of famous culturists. Modern historians assert that "The biography of twelfth of emperors" is like the model of Marius Maximus' work in the former Republican period. Later, the biographies are the source for subsequent biographical compilation, called *Historia Augusta*, as the next part of Suetonius' work. *Historia Augusta* is a collective biography, partly fictional,

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<sup>2</sup> See also Benario, Herbert (1975), W. An Introduction to Tacitus, GA: University of Georgia Press, Athens.

about emperors and usurpers in the second and third centuries. In the Middle Ages, the book on the emperor biography *The life of Charlemagne* by Einhard (9th century) was written with Suetonius' writing style. Translators *Tapio Riihonen* and *David Widger*, when translating Suetonius' work into English, exclaimed in the preface: "*In this collection, we find a series of personal portraits drawn from life, with perfect truth and strict fairness*" [7; 3], as the evaluation of the work method and serious attitude of Suetonius.

### 3. The Stoicism in court life

Rome culture attaches great importance to philosophy in social life. The Romans did not create any new philosophical school, but they create a location for the development of philosophical ideas originated in Greece. One of the ideas is Stoicism<sup>3</sup>. One of the most prominent philosophers is the politician, philosopher and orator Cicero (106–43 BC). He shaped the notion of "humanism" – that is a notion of life that places man in the center. During the Pax Romana, the Stoic philosopher Seneca (4 BC–65) continued this philosophical school and said that "for human beings, they are sacred beings". That statement has become the slogan for humanism since then. Stoic philosophers believe that everyone is a part of the same human knowledge – or "logos." They claim that each person is a miniature world or "small universe" – a reflection of the "great universe." As the true children of their time, the Stoic philosophers were true "cosmopolitanism" in that they were open to contemporary culture. They called attention to human friendships, and they cared so much about politics.

The most influential philosopher, however, is Epictetus (55–135), a former eminent slave. He taught that man can attain freedom by mastering his desires and cultivating the serenity of his soul. "*Epictetus calls for fraternity between people, united with nature and God's will. And the arising from the external world is the cause of suffering. Human beings must be free from material constraints, fame, and status*" [4; 178-179 Who wants to find happiness must follow a natural, calm life and accept the gain and the lost.

The Romans studied the humanist thought and universalized Stoicism. The strength and dedication of men are in the service of the empire. Stoicism transformed the idea of Plato to the idea that all men are equal in nature but unequal in talent and personality. A man has to

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<sup>3</sup> The cynical philosophers contributed to the development of the Stoic philosophy school in Athens around 300 BC. The founder of this school was Zeno, a Cypriot man who had come to the cynicism of Athens after a shipwreck. He usually gathers his students under a large veranda. The term "stoic" in Greek originates from the porch (stoa). Later Stoicism had a great influence on the culture of Rome.

reestablish and strengthen the balance and harmony of the world, which is threatened by transgression and decay.

Stoic thought was learned by the emperors and one of them became an excellent disciple, a philosopher represented by Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180). The Emperor wrote *Meditations* in Greek to teach himself and to improve himself with his ideology, expressing the spirit and philosophy of Stoicism. Living with his Stoic philosophy, Aurelius feels right in relationships: *“That I had good grandparents, a good mother and father, a good sister, good teachers, good servants, relatives, friends – almost without exception. And that I never lost control of myself with any of them although I had it in me to do that, and I might have, easily. But thanks to the gods, I was never put in that position, and so escaped the test.”*[3; 65].

With his philosophy and meditations, Aurelius wrote: *“And not to think of philosophy as your instructor but as the sponge and egg white that relieve ophthalmia – as a soothing ointment, a warm lotion. Not showing off your obedience to the logos but resting in it. Remember: philosophy requires only what your nature already demands. What you’ve been after is something else again – something unnatural”* [3; 87].

And the life attitude of a monarch leads successor to the admiration of a positive choice in the rules of conduct, as an example in Book 2, (*On the Mother River, among the Quadi*), Aurelius wrote: *“No one can implicate me in ugliness. Nor can I feel angry at my relative, or hate him. We were born to work together like feet, hands, and eyes, like the two rows of teeth, upper and lower. To obstruct each other is unnatural. To feel anger at someone, to turn your back on him: these are obstructions”* [3; 74].

So far, *Meditations* has been honored with the great literature written about the duty and virtue of the Government. It is impossible to understand how Marcus Aurelius’ work was spread after his death. In modern times, this work has become the most read material on Stoic philosophy. Numerous politicians, artists, etc. enjoy Stoicism very much.<sup>4</sup>

This period also witnessed the development of other Greek philosophical branches such as Plato’s philosophy, Aristotle’s philosophy, and the enjoyment doctrine. However, the achievements of these branches were not outstanding. Much is the continuation of and learning the values that had been shaped. In schools, there were four academic professorships in philosophy for Plato, Aristotle, Stoic, and Epicurus, demonstrating Rome’s interest in the “science of all sciences” in their orientation and conception of cultural development.

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<sup>4</sup> See also The Definitive List of Stoicism in History & Pop Culture (<https://dailystoic.com/stoicism-pop-culture/>)

#### 4. Forms of religion, polytheism

Ancient Romans were polytheistic, worshipping many gods at once, either natural or human, which were attached to social life. Norman Davies, in *History of Europe*, has a general view of the religion of Rome as follows: “Roman religious life is eclectic to the amazing. In the course of centuries, the Romans approached most of the gods of the Mediterranean and worshiped them in their faith” [6; 159]. This statement evaluates the religious spirit and perceiving attitudes of Rome throughout its history. The Romans worshiped the gods of protecting the family, such as the god of the stove and the god of the granary. They also worshiped gods of protection such as the god of earth Vestal. When they came into contact with Greek civilization, they brought gods on atop Olympia into worship but the Greek gods into their own. The Romans worshiped 12 main gods, including six gods and six goddesses, called the list of Dii Consentes in their temples: Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Vesta, Ceres, Diana, Venus, Mars, Mercurius, Neptunus, Volcanus, and Apollo. The Roman gods have the functions as the Greek’s. For example, Jupiter, who is in ancient Rome is known as Zeus in ancient Greece, is the God of gods, the god of the sky, the thunder, law, order, or Juno. Jupiter’s wife in Rome has the same functions as Goddess Hera of ancient Greece. Both of them are known as the protector of women, marriage, and family. The god of the earth of the Greek Déméter became Cerès – The Goddess of the harvest, fertility, agriculture, nature, and seasons. She presided over grains and the fertility of the earth. Minerva is equivalent to the Greek goddess Athena, who is the virgin goddess of poetry, medicine, wisdom, commerce, weaving, crafts, magic, and the inventors of music. The god of beauty and love is Venus, whom Rome worshiped as Aphrodite in Greek mythology protecting trade between nations.

Fustel de Coulanges emphasizes the religious role of Rome: “Each house is a temple of infinite divinities: the kitchen, the wall, the gate, the tomb in the field are holy. Every action in the family is a religious ritual. Divinities were worshiped in the family, street area, urban. “There are more gods than citizens.” [8; 85].

By the time of the Republic, the Romans followed Eastern religions such as the worship of Atargatis of Syria, the Cybele of Asia Minor, the god Isis of Egypt. During Pax Romana, the late emperors were worshiped and glorified as a religion of the Empire. In the military, the god Mithras was considered the religion of warriors towards the faith of love, light, and darkness. In “Hymn of the 30th legion”, the author stated

*“Mithras, God of the Morning, our trumpets waken the Wall!*

*‘Rome is above the Nations, but Thou art over all!’*



*Now as the names are answered, and the guards are marched away,*

*Mithras, also a soldier, give us strength for the day!*

*Mithras, God of the Noontide, the heather swims in the heat.*

*Our helmets scorch our foreheads, our sandals bum our feet.*

*Now in the ungirt hour--now ere we blink and drowse,*

*Mithras, also a soldier, keep us true to our vows!*

*Mithras, God of the Sunset, low on the Western main*

*Thou descending immortal, immortal to rise again!*

*Now when the watch is ended, now when the wine is drawn!*

*Mithras, also a soldier, keep us pure till the dawn!*

*Mithras, God of the Midnight, here where the great bull dies,*

*Look on thy children in darkness. Oh take our sacrifice!*

*Many roads thou hast fashioned – all of them lead to the Light:*

*Mithras, also a soldier, teach us to die aright! ! [6; 160].*

The Romans also worshiped a sacred oak tree, which was sacred to burn eternal fire. Devotees to the worship are women who wish to have children. Gods such as goddess Diana, the god of birth, the god of the moon, the god of hunting, the god Egeria, the water goddess, and assistant virgins Virbius, the god of the forest are worshiped. An annual festival is held in summer. A small forest is lighted with many torches and women throughout Italy set fire to gratitude. This forest is administered by a priest, known as the King of the Forest (Rex Nemorensis). Whoever wants to be a priest must cut a branch of a tree – the Golden Branch – of a special tree in the sacred forest and kill his predecessor with that very branch. The path of the mission would thus be history in the blood of the killings. This mysterious religious action suggested to J. G. Frazer to put the first bricks to write *The Golden Bough*, the foundation for modern ethnography. The nature of the irrational thinking style and mythic thinking style has been explained by Frazer: “[it is] really a way of systematic law of nature, and at the same time a misguided guide to behavior, a false science as well as a barren art” [2; 108].

In general, the worship of polytheism manifests the synthesis in the creed of the Romans. They need to receive every god to be patronized and relieved in production and daily living. On the other hand, they do not distinctly envisage the divinity as Greek people. Gods do not have a body, brain, and will but only a name and function. The gods are invisible spiritual forces, generally called *Nunina*, and later upon conceiving other influences with formation and personalization.

On the issue of religion, the birth and functioning of Catholicism are considered the most worthy topic of the religion of Rome during Pax Romana. Catholicism was formed in the Near East, which belonged to the Roman Empire at that time. Catholic history began when Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem, the Jewish kingdom of Judea, and he began to preach. The core convictions of Catholics focus on the human incarnation, the remission of humanity, the death on the cross, and the resurrection of Jesus to save mankind from sin and death. The commandment of Jesus is repentance, unconditional love, the forgiveness of sins and pardon, and heaven.

At the outset, Catholicism was not banned by the Roman government. However, soon the Roman authority found *"The exclusive sovereignty of Christ clashed with Caesar's claims to his own exclusive sovereignty"* [5; 34]. That the unconditional belief by the Catholics that Jesus Christ is their savior who saves them from their sins and takes away the sin from the world seems to be a big challenge to the religious syncretism, which did not demand loyalty to one god but did demand preeminent loyalty to the state. While the Romans were expected to practise their religion with numerous feast and festival days throughout the year, Christian monotheism prevented Christians from participating in anything involving 'other gods'. The persecution of Christians was executed by both the state and the locals. In the year 64, Rome City embedded into the sea of fire. During two days, a terrible fire swept through the city and burned everything, destroying 3 of the 14 districts of Rome City. Historians suspect that Nero (37–68) ordered the burning of Rome to slander Catholic followers and used this excuse to suppress and punish them. After the fire, Nero hunted down and brutally tortured Catholics, forcing them into the arena for the beast to tear the body or to tie them to dry hay to set fire. The despot Nero was the first to persecute Catholics. The emperors who succeeded him also followed that autocratic policy. In spite of this, Catholicism was not destroyed, but it grew stronger and proved its social and political role in later centuries.

In conclusion, compared with other cultures, the religious world of Rome is different and when it comes to religion. The authors of *Religions of Rome* wrote: *"... what we have written is the product of a necessary compromise between our prejudices, lessons in intercultural theory and the impact*

of the Roman religious representatives. We did not work with a single definition of religion in mind but works to understand what can be considered "religion" in Rome and how that can make a difference to our understanding of world self-worth"[5; 10].

## 5. Conclusion

Being influenced by Greek culture, the Romans, in words of many researchers, created their masterpieces in the field of civic life, in politics, in the building of the state. They are all for integrity and perfection. Therefore, a government, no matter its form, must promote its cultural, civilizational values at the level of the highest tolerance and fusion. This is the foundation for valuing others' values. Rome, besides its military power, politics, and governance, is also the superiority of civilized development. The subordinated nations and people accepted Rome as a guarantee of the right to enjoy the practical values of a civilized life instead of a sense of belonging. Later, during the West's clash with the East and the maintaining of colonial rules, it was at the same time a process of the popularization of civilization, which was accepted by colonial states. The Roman Empire with a fascinatingly cultural spirit has spread throughout the annals of world history.

Indeed, the ancient Romans built a unique culture that deeply and widely printed in the culture of most European nations.

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