

ROME

Against some lower estimates, Rome's population was probably close to a million people, by far the largest city of Mediterranean antiquity. This massive population was sustained by a regular grain dole and heavy imports that included more than 200,000 tons (180,000 metric tons) of grain each year. Nevertheless, most of the residents were poor, living in tenement apartments that grew cheaper but also smaller and less sturdy as the floors went higher.

An estimated 40,000 – 50,000 of Rome's residents were Jewish. Some of these Jewish people were Roman citizens, most of them descended from slaves freed more than a century earlier. Greek was the primary language of Rome's Jewish community, however, and also the language of Paul's letter to the believers in Rome. The majority of Jews were poor, and many worked on the docks by the Tiber River. Sources from the period show that Romans ridiculed some Jewish customs, especially circumcision, the Sabbath and Jewish food laws. Many other Romans were attracted to Judaism, but the conversion of Roman women often provoked aristocratic men to criticize Judaism more harshly.

Because Rome mistrusted meetings that it could not control, the Jewish community in the capitol was not united. In contrast to Alexandria, where one leader spoke for the Jewish community, Rome had many synagogues with separate leaders. Such an environment apparently proved conducive for the spread of Jesus' message in a number of the synagogues.

In the wake of one scandal reportedly involving a single Jewish swindler, the emperor Tiberius (42 BC – AD 37) expelled the Jewish community from Rome. Later, probably in AD 49, the emperor Claudius did the same, although it is not likely in either case that all Jews actually left. Because Claudius's expulsion is believed to have been in response to Jewish divisions about the Messiah, it seems likely that Jewish followers of Jesus (cf. Acts 2:10) were involved. This may explain why Aquila and Priscilla were among those compelled to leave (Acts 18:1 – 2). Many scholars believe that Gentile Christians went their separate way from the synagogues after this, accounting for the limited information about them held by members of the Jewish elite in Acts 28:22.

continued on next page

Nevertheless, the Christian community in Rome grew exponentially. In AD 54, Claudius's death in effect repealed his earlier expulsion order, so even ringleaders in the previous disputes could return. Paul thus knows personally many of the leaders mentioned in Rom. 16. As the heart of the empire, Rome always drew visitors and immigrants, and the visits of Paul and (according to very probable early tradition) Peter undoubtedly encouraged the church's growth there. In AD 64, a fire destroyed much of Rome with its narrow alleys and many flimsy wooden structures. Rumor blamed the emperor, but Nero found a convenient scapegoat in the Christians. Though he burned large numbers of them alive as torches to light his imperial gardens at night and killed some Christians in other ways, the movement remained strong in Rome after Nero's demise. This suggests that by this point, just three and a half decades after Jesus' resurrection in Judea, Jesus had thousands of followers in Rome. ♦



Artist's recreation of the first-century forum at Rome.

© Balage Baloge, www.archaeologyillustrated.com