



# **A Cabinet of Roman Curiosities: Strange Tales and Surprising Facts from the World's Greatest Empire**

*J. C. McKeown*

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Here is a whimsical and captivating collection of odd facts, strange beliefs, outlandish opinions, and other highly amusing trivia of the ancient Romans. We tend to think of the Romans as a pragmatic people with a ruthlessly efficient army, an exemplary legal system, and a precise and elegant language. *A Cabinet of Roman Curiosities* shows that the Romans were equally capable of bizarre superstitions, logic-defying customs, and often hilariously derisive views of their fellow Romans and non-Romans.

Classicist J. C. McKeown has organized the entries in this entertaining volume around major themes--The Army, Women, Religion and Superstition, Family Life, Medicine, Slaves, Spectacles--allowing for quick browsing or more deliberate consumption. Among the book's many gems are:

· Romans on urban living:

The satirist Juvenal lists "fires, falling buildings, and poets reciting in August as hazards to life in Rome."

· On enhanced interrogation:

"If we are obliged to take evidence from an arena-fighter or some other such person, his testimony is not to be believed unless given under torture." (Justinian)

· On dreams:

Dreaming of eating books "foretells advantage to teachers, lecturers, and anyone who earns his livelihood from books, but for everyone else it means sudden death"

· On food:

"When people unwittingly eat human flesh, served by unscrupulous restaurant owners and other such people, the similarity to pork is often noted." (Galen)

· On marriage:

In ancient Rome a marriage could be arranged even when the parties were absent, so long as they knew of the arrangement, "or agreed to it subsequently."

· On health care:

Pliny caustically described medical bills as a "down payment on death," and Martial quipped that "Diaulus used to be a doctor, now he's a mortician. He does as a mortician what he did as a doctor."

For anyone seeking an inglorious glimpse at the underside of the greatest empire in history, *A Cabinet of Roman Curiosities* offers endless delights.

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