RECONSTRUCTING A PAST CIVILIZATION [1]

By Selatie E. Stout
Indiana University

The proper study of mankind is man, said a great English poet. To understand the human soul; to analyze its motives, the springs of its action; to determine the ideals most consistent with its nature and constitution; to learn the conditions most conducive to its growth to highest perfection; to find the meaning of life, and to express that meaning in noble and worthy living has been man's highest quest through the ages.

This was not his earliest quest. Through a long period of human history, from the time when, like the beasts, he made his home in caves, before his wit had armed his weakness and made him master among animal kind, and while he was slowly winning his way to the skills and the arts that were to transform animal man into civilized man, his struggle was for existence. That is a struggle from which he can never escape. He must ever eat his bread in the sweat of his brow. But the struggle has been mitigated. Through the selection, domestication, and development of plants and animals, and the discovery of the resources of nature and the utilization of her powers in his service, he has won a portion of leisure that can be devoted to higher ends.

The development of a high type of intellectual and moral life among men has been slow. It is necessary to preserve the experience of the past as a guide in the solution of the problems of the present. This is especially true of the problems of individual life and ideals, and of those that arise in the social and political relations of organized society. This experience is not easily preserved. Great peoples arise and work out their solution of these problems in such a way as to reach a higher

[1] Phi Beta Kappa address delivered at Indiana University, January 21, 1925. Reprinted from the April, 1925, *Indiana University Alumni Quarterly.*

individual and social plane of life. Through fundamental errors of their own or through inability to meet the pressure exerted upon them by multiplying hordes of less advanced peoples, their highly developed systems give way. The initiative passes on into newly aligned groups. When the curtain of time is drawn down over their life and institutions, it soon becomes a most difficult task to restore these to the minds of future generations for analysis, for study, and for instruction.

Great advances have, however, been made in the last century in the methods of finding and of interpreting evidence that leads to a truer and completer knowledge of the civilizations of the past. Much of ancient history has been rewritten in the past generation. Every year brings new revisions and new chapters of importance. The methods are of universal application, and new fields are constantly being opened. Within the past twenty years, papyrus finds have opened the way for most illuminating study of the history of Romanized Egypt in the early centuries of the Christian era, and much of the new material has not yet been studied and interpreted or even made fully accessible to scholars. Within the past few years, the riddle of the Hittite language has been solved, and the fifteen hundred Hittite inscriptions, whose secrets have been sealed until now, will bring most welcome light to the study of a great civilization that was contemporary with and in contact with the most interesting period of Hebrew history and with the prehistoric Mycenæan, Greek, and Trojan peoples. A movement that seems likely to bring a notable contribution to our knowledge of the Middle Ages, an important and neglected period of history, has been organized within the last two years by the concerted action of British, French, Italian, and American scholars. The work of excavation of important sites in classic lands, in which our own University ought and easily could have at least a modest part by joining with the forty leading universities and colleges of our country in the support of the American Academies in Rome and Athens, adds each year important contributions to our knowledge of these rich and instructive civilizations. The great advance in our

knowledge of these civilizations in the past century has been due in part to new evidence from excavations, but in quite as large part to the careful examination, classification, and interpretation of evidence that had been neglected, especially that of inscriptions.

If we look about us at the products of our own civilization and culture, we do not see much that would remain to interpret us after two thousand years. Our wooden houses would be dust; our thin-walled buildings of stone, brick, and concrete, a mass of debris; our machinery and all iron structures, rust. The paper of our books yellows and crumbles with age, and not many of them will be reprinted through the centuries. The canvases that receive our paintings are frail, and will fare badly in the accidents of the centuries. Our marbles and bronzes are few. Our distant memory seems likely to demand the patience and the skill of the antiquarian scholar quite as much as does that of Greece and Rome.

I trust I may be pardoned now in this company of my friends if I develop my subject from this point with reference purely to that ancient civilization to which I have given special study. The method of reconstructing our conception of it is the universal method of the modern historian of any past age; the available evidence would of course vary with the subject of our study.

The language itself reveals the working of the thought of the people that develop it. Many of its nouns are descriptive personifications, and tell us what aspect of the thing named was uppermost in their thought. A few illustrations may make this more clear. For the state they had three names: *civitas,* the body of *cives;* non-citizens, the stranger, and the slave had no rights which the state was bound to respect, the state being organized solely to serve the interest of its citizens; *res publica,* in Anglo-Saxon the commonwealth, the property or the interest of the *populus; imperium,* command or authority, the *populus* in action through its deputized official. Here then is embodied their conception of the state, the organized citizenship that acts through the officers that it has clothed with temporary authority to care for the common interests. Their highest officer at first

was the *rex,* who, after being elected by the *populus,* ruled them (*rego,* to rule); next it was the *praetor* (*praeitor*), the one who went before, which tells us that they were beset with enemies, that the organized host was the state and the general the channel through which the populus carried out its will; later the highest officer was called *consul, nominatus,* says Varro, *qui consuleret populum et senatum,* who, while but little constrained by legal restrictions, exercised his functions only in constant touch with the people or with the official body of advisers, the senate; later still, when liberty was no longer possible, the *princeps,* or first citizen, who was distinguished by no outward signs of authority, yet ruled with but thinly-veiled autocratic power. This soon was replaced by *imperator,* which has come to us as emperor, but to the Romans meant only commander of the army. This was at a time, however, when the large standing army, a recent development in the life of the state, was able to dictate to the state it served, and its general was in fact an autocrat. In the range of moral ideas I will take one example. We speak of committing a crime. We think of the result as sent forth from its author. The Roman's word was *immittere,* to let the crime in. The man who stole took into his life a thing of which he could never rid himself. From that time forth he was a thief. The careful examination of the words of a language yields us a key to the way ideas shaped themselves in the minds of a people, their conception of human relations, the aspects of things that appealed to them most strongly. In the case of some ancient peoples, this is our only evidence as to their civilization. Yet even from a limited vocabulary, it yields us much. The rich vocabulary of the Romans is the starting-point for all studies of their ideas and institutions. The structure, moreover, of their sentences, their syntax, expresses the dominant characteristic of this people. While it lacks the grace and freedom of the Greek, it combines strength and dignity in its unimaginative, inexorable adherence to law. The manner and the matter of speech reveal the character and the mind of a people as surely as they do in the case of an individual. This great language cannot be said, in any

proper sense of the word, to have died. It passed by insensible degrees of change into Italian, Sicilian, Spanish, Portugese, French, Rumanian in the same sense that Old English gradually changed into modern English; and, grafted into the stock of our English tongue, has yielded the richly flavored, cultivated fruit of our present speech. In this way the genius of the Roman people continues to influence, it is scarcely too much to say to dominate, the fundamental conceptions that enter into the thought of the world today. The intimate study of their vocabulary and their sentence structure enables the sympathetic student to look upon life and the problems of life from their viewpoint.

One other witness to the Romans' answer to the great human question has had a continuous history from their day to ours. The great system of Roman law expresses their analysis of the relations of men to individual fellow-men and to the society of which they are a part. It is the greatest achievement of the mind and conscience of this virile race. The thought and judgment of this great people on the fundamental conception of justice was expressed in the form in which we have it by their jurists rather than by their legislators. To this perhaps we owe its great quality of universal application. In this form it was separately taken up and epitomized and carried on as an active instrument of government by the Ostrogoths, the Burgundians, and the Visogoths, who had overrun parts of the Roman Empire. But the excellent statement of it that has made it the teacher of the world in questions of law and jurisprudence was made at Constantinople under Justinian, one of the many services of the Byzantines in preserving for the modern world the treasures of Greece and Rome. It consists merely of systematically arranged excerpts from Roman judicial decisions and juristic writings. It became the basis of the canon law of the Catholic church. It was adopted as the fundamental law of the Holy Roman Empire, and was never displaced as the fundamental law of the German peoples until in 1900. Rewritten in more modern terms in the Napoleonic code, it is today the basic law in France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, in Spanish- and Portuguese-American countries, and

in the state of Louisiana; and the modern code of Japan is mainly Roman law. A great German writer on law (Sohm) says that "from the time when the school of Bologna [1100 A.D.] stood at the height of its influence down to the present day, the leadership in the science of law has always fallen to the nation for the time being supreme in the domain of the law of the Pandects." As a witness to the mind and heart of a great people, to their conception of life and the social obligations, it deserves to rank with the books of the law in the Old Testament. Nothing else in all the literature of the past is comparable to it.

The literature of Rome is perhaps the most important witness to the genius and spirit of her civilization. I name it third because it has not poured its stream of influence into the current of the world's thought continuously since it arose from the common thought and ideals of the Romans. The untutored hordes that overwhelmed the decadent civilization of Rome in the fifth century could not assimilate her literature. The words of the language of her common folk, packed with the concepts and the reactions of a more advanced intelligence and reflecting a richer and riper experience, they did adopt, in large measure giving up their own. Out of this *sermo plebeius* grew the Romance languages. Even its limited vocabulary brought a wider range of ideas to Rome's conquerors. It did much to transform them and to mould them to the ways and forms of civilization. From the Romance civilizations and languages the historian recovers much to fill out his picture of the parent civilization at Rome. But for the language of Rome's poets, orators, statesmen, historians, philosophers, her vanquishers had no ears. Their spirits responded only to duller and simpler ryhthms. Their minds were set on grosser gains. These priceless products of the cultivated human spirit were banished from the current thought of men. Some of them continued a precarious existence in the monasteries, where now and then a pious hand was found to renew their hold on life by recopying them. But those who read them or could read them grew ever fewer. Many of them were lost; while others, as the first six books of the *Annals* of Tacitus, have been

preserved to the modern world by but a single manuscript. The quickening of spirit, the stir of intellectual energy, the chastening of taste that attended the rediscovery one by one of these fine expressions of the noblest thought and feeling that throb through the soul of man, so sane, so strong, so fundamentally true, is known to every student of the Renaissance. They rekindled the finest enthusiasms in the choice spirits of the time. Every place that might conceal such a treasure was ransacked. When one was found, it was multiplied in hundreds of copies laboriously made by hand and sent on its mission into every country of Europe. And well has that labor been repaid. The thought and the literature of every European stock has been at one time under the tutelage of the thought and literature of Classic Rome, has had its classical period. Perhaps the domination has been too thorough everywhere at some one period, but out of that and through that has in each case been reached the truly national in thought and literature. Rome, too, passed through her period of tutelage to Greek, and some there are who depreciate her literature because at first it is dominated by Greek masters, and through most of its course continues to show traces of Greek influence. But it has its own true native spirit. It expresses a solution of life problems that grew out of a wider and more dignified national experience than the Greeks ever knew. If it lacks something of the richness of imagination and the speculative range of the Greek, it is yet both richly imaginative and wide in range, and is more sane and keeps in closer touch with actual human experience. Students of Lucretius and Catullus, Cicero and Caesar, Horace and Vergil, Livy and Tacitus follow in an intimate way the thoughts, the hopes, the fears, the ideals of the best of Rome. We enter through them and the contemporary writers with a clearer understanding than is possible in the case of any other people of history except the Greeks and the Hebrews into the actual inner history of individual man and of organized society. In no other literature can worth-while, instructive human experience be more adequately followed than in that of Rome. This is the secret of its gripping appeal to all men who

are interested in the proper study of mankind. It is this that makes it the most instructive witness to the higher reaches of the civilization of the Romans.

But a large proportion of the individual units of a great people live on a plane far below that of the choicest spirits. Students of Roman life are most fortunate in having in the great body of Latin inscriptions a unique source of instruction on the more prosaic side of life in that society. These were carved for the most part on stone or metal, and have preserved both their form and their content through the centuries, many of them buried in the soil, in the beds of streams or pools, in piles of rubbish. Some have been found built into the walls of fences or of houses, some serving less noble purposes, one at least in use as a doorstep at the cottage of a peasant who was all unconscious of its great interest and value as a document of human history. Two hundred and fifty thousand of these have been found in all parts of the ancient Roman world. Their readings have been gathered in the great *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum,* published by the Prussian Academy during the last sixty years and still far from complete. Each year adds many new finds, any one of which may furnish the missing link in a chain of evidence or give a clue that leads to the elucidation of others not yet understood. Many of these can be dated exactly or within a narrow space of time; practically all of them can be assigned to a general period of time. Perhaps ninety per cent of them lie between 50 B.C. and 250 A.D. Minute and careful study and comparison by hundreds of students have developed many tests for dating them. This has greatly increased their value for historical purposes. The variety of subjects of public and private interest upon which they throw light is almost beyond belief. On bronze plates we find laws, decisions of judges or commissions, decrees of the senate and of officials, charters of cities, the honorable discharge of hundreds of private soldiers. If an emperor made a trip through the empire, enough cities would set up honorary inscriptions recording his visit to their city for us even yet to make out his itinerary. If he made a complimentary reference to a

city or a people, civic pride would probably have it carved in stone or bronze and set up in the city as a mark of distinction. One such inscription gives an interesting check on the historian Tacitus, who reports the same speech in his *Annals*. A list of consuls for five hundred years was carved on the stones of the walls of the office of the Pontifex Maximus for the convenience and instruction of the crowds that gathered in the Forum for business or pleasure. Large portions of this list have been found in the debris of the building. The emperor Augustus left a long but summary statement of his achievements, which was carved in marble and set up in Rome. This is lost, but most of it was found in Ancyra in Asia Minor, where a copy of it with a translation into Greek was set up. Within the past year, in excavations made by the University of Michigan in Antioch of Pisidia, forty fragments of another copy of this important inscription have been found, some of which supply parts previously missing. Honorary inscriptions in great numbers give us the official career of hundreds of prominent men, and incidentally teach us details of the governmental system obtainable from no other source. Inscriptions on public works enable us to follow waves of financial prosperity and depression. Milestones on the highways tell us by whom and when roads were built and repaired, and enable us to trace the gradual solidification of Roman power and dominance in various parts of the empire. Factory stamps on bricks and manufactured articles, of which we have a few examples in our own modest collection, locate and date factory centers and production. Votive offerings to various deities enable us to trace the rise and decay of religious cults. Certain symbols used by Christians on their tombstones enable us to date the entry of Christianity and to gauge its hold upon the population at various times in various parts of the empire. By far the most numerous are inscriptions on tombstones. These pathetic memorials of the longing of the living to linger in the memory of men after their night has come, or tender tributes by the living of grateful affection for their dear departed, are interesting human documents. What a charming picture of a good woman is this from a tombstone of about 130 B.C.:

Stranger, my words are few, pause and read them through. This is the tomb unbeautiful of a beautiful woman. From her parents she had the name of Claudia. Love of her husband was enshrined in her heart. Two sons she bore. One of these she leaves upon the earth, one she placed beneath the sod. Charming was her speech, graceful her carriage too. Her home she kept, and spun her task of wool. My story is ended. You may now pass on.

She was at least in spirit a progenitor of the woman two hundred years later in Spain whose husband recorded on her tombstone that they had lived together forty years without the slightest tiff between them. Many hundreds of such memorials of the common people reveal the qualities of manhood and womanhood that seemed commendable to them. Life histories are briefly given, but the composite of these fills out for us, numberless details of history and of institutions, of public and private life. The political life of the provincial towns we reconstruct from the offices held by the locally illustrious dead. An interesting sidelight is added here by the dozen election posters found on the walls of Pompeii, in which men commend to their fellow-citizens over their own signature certain candidates for office. Through inscriptions on the tombs of soldiers we can follow the history of the various legions of the army, determining the sources of their enlistments, their stations and campaigns, their officers, their camp duties, their discipline, even the clothes they wore; for Roman soldiers too were proud of their uniforms, and many of the tombstones show how fine the son or husband looked in his soldier togs. We even have an inscription in which an emperor, after complaining in a preamble that merchants have been outrageously overcharging his soldier boys, fixes maximum prices at which a great variety of articles of common use may be sold. My list is already long, but I may add for its local interest the record of an unliterary-minded schoolboy who had failed to develop an interest in poetry. It was before the introduction of the elective system. On his way home from school he scrawled on a wall this easement of his feelings: *Q. Horatius Flaccus, di omnes perduint*! (Quintus Horatius Flaccus, may all the gods destroy him!)

These are but random samples of the rich contribution made by inscriptions to our knowledge of the life and the interests of the people of Rome. There is practically no topic of the public or private life, or of the history of this people that has not been so illuminated by inscriptions as to require rewriting in the last generation, and much remains to be done.

One other source of great help in reconstructing the life of ancient Rome lies in the work of the archæologist. The shovel, the sieve, the wheelbarrow, and carefully directed human hands have rescued countless objects of ancient use and art. The catastrophe that buried the thriving Italian city of Pompeii with volcanic dust and mud from Vesuvius in 79 A.D. halted the business and social life of the city almost in an instant, and preserved its forms through the centuries until an enlightened interest was ready to lift the cover and study the lesson preserved in this page of human history. About two-thirds of the city has been uncovered and the work continues. But there are many buried cities. Volcanic action is not required by nature to hide the works of man. Wind-blown dust and the residual products of vegetation have raised the surface level at an average of from eight to twelve inches per century, so that deserted ruins of the time of Christ are now found buried to the depth of thirteen to twenty feet. Even cities that have been continuously inhabited show corresponding rises in level, especially in their lower parts. Often foundations of two or three former buildings are found beneath the same surface at different levels. The city of Ostia, once at the mouth of the Tiber River, where it served as the harbor of Rome, now two miles inland, was thus buried to the depth of eight to twenty feet. Each year the slow excavations there bring additions to our knowledge of the life of the second and third centuries A.D., with frequent confirmation or correction of current hypotheses. The news dispatches carried notices of rich finds last autumn in a newly-discovered Roman city of North Africa. While I have not as yet found confirmation of these in more special publications, I am inclined to think they contain at least an element of truth. At any rate, each year fills out and

enriches our intimate knowledge of the conditions and the attainments of the throbbing life of the men who for a time led the onward march of human kind toward its ultimate goal of high and ordered and worthy living. The center of interest of Greek and Roman archæological studies has, I think, essentially shifted in the last thirty years. A generation ago the study concerned itself primarily with works of art. More recently a greater store than formerly has been set upon more common objects. They, too, belong to life, and the study of all human life has its instruction and its interest. Within the past few years one of our American scholars made the first systematic attempt to write the economic history of Rome, and with a great measure of success. The excavations of archæologists have made it possible. In general the greater attention of archæologists to other than the art side of classical life has brought much assistance in the study of the common life of Greece and Rome.

Our Phi Beta Kappa society is built upon the belief that philosophy is the guide of life. The guide of life is the great quest of man. Every field of knowledge makes its greatest contribution to man as it advances this end. The physical sciences have done much and will do more to free man from his superstitions, to solve the mysteries of his environment, and give him greater control over it. The historical sciences must preserve the story, the wonderful story, of his advances in the art of living, of his successive attempts to find and attain the meaning of life.