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# Ancient History Sourcebook: Strabo (64/3 BCE- c.21 CE): The Grandeur of Rome, c. 20 CE *from Geography, V.iii*

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## [Davis Introduction]

*Addressing a Greek audience, Strabo gives us this impression of the physical aspect of the mighty city that had mastered the Greek World.. He wrote in the age of Augustus. The city probably continued to increase in magnificence for the next two hundred years, and a number of the most famous buildings, e.g. the Flavian Amphitheater, were not yet erected.*

The Greek cities are thought to have flourished mainly on account of the felicitous choice made by their founders, in regard to the beauty and strength of their sites, their proximity to some haven, and the fineness of the country. But the Roman prudence was more particularly employed on matters which have received but little attention from the Greeks---such as paving their roads, constructing aqueducts, and sewers. In fact they have paved the roads, cut through hills, and filled up valleys, so that the merchandise may be conveyed by carriage from the ports. The sewers, arched over with hewn stones, are large enough in parts for actual hay wagons to pass through, while so plentiful is the supply of water from the aqueducts, that rivers may be said to flow through the city and the sewers, and almost every house is furnished with water pipes and copious fountains.

We may remark that the ancients [of Republican times] bestowed little attention upon the beautifying of Rome. But their successors, and especially those of our own day, have at the same time embellished the city with numerous and splendid objects. Pompey, the Divine Caesar [i.e. Julius Caesar], and Augustus, with his children, friends, wife, and sister have surpassed all others in their zeal and munificence in these decorations. The greater number of these may be seen in the Campus Martius which to the beauties of nature adds those of art. The size of the plain is remarkable, allowing chariot races and the equestrian sports without hindrance, and multitudes [here] exercise themselves with ball games, in the Circus, and on the wrestling grounds. The structures that surround [the Campus], the greensward covered with herbage all the year around, the summit of the hills beyond the Tiber, extending from its banks with panoramic effect, present a spectacle which the eye abandons with regret.

Near to this plain is another surrounded with columns, sacred groves, three theaters, an amphitheater, and superb temples, each close to the other, and so splendid that it would seem idle to describe the rest of the city after it. For this cause the Romans esteeming it the most sacred place, have erected funeral monuments there to the illustrious persons of either sex. The most remarkable of these is that called the "Mausoleum" [the tomb of Augustus] which consists of a mound of earth raised upon a high foundation of white marble, situated near the river, and covered on the top with evergreen shrubs. Upon the summit is a bronze statue of Augustus Caesar, and beneath the mound are the funeral urns of himself, his relatives, and his friends. Behind is a large grove containing charming promenades. In the center of the plain [the Campus

Martius] is the spot where [the body of] this prince was reduced to ashes. It is surrounded by a double enclosure, one of marble, the other of iron, and planted within with poplars. If thence you proceed to visit the ancient Forum, which is equally filled with basilicas, porticoes, and temples, you will there behold the Capitol, the Palatine, and the noble works that adorn them, and the piazza of Livia [Augustus's Empress], each successive work causing you speedily to forget that which you have seen before. Such then is Rome!

In Rome there is continual need of wood and stone for ceaseless building caused by the frequent falling down of houses, and on account of conflagrations and of sales which seem never to cease. These sales are a kind of voluntary falling-down of houses, each owner knocking down and rebuilding according to his individual taste. For these purposes the numerous quarries, forests, and rivers in the region which convey the materials, offer wonderful facilities.

Augustus Caesar endeavored to avert from the city the dangers alluded to, and instituted a company of freedmen, who should be ready to lend their assistance in the ease of conflagration, while as a preventive against falling houses he decreed that all new buildings should not be carried to the same height as formerly, and those erected along the public ways should not exceed seventy feet in height. But these improvements must have ceased except for the facilities afforded to Rome by the quarries, the forests, and the ease of transport.

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**Source:**

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