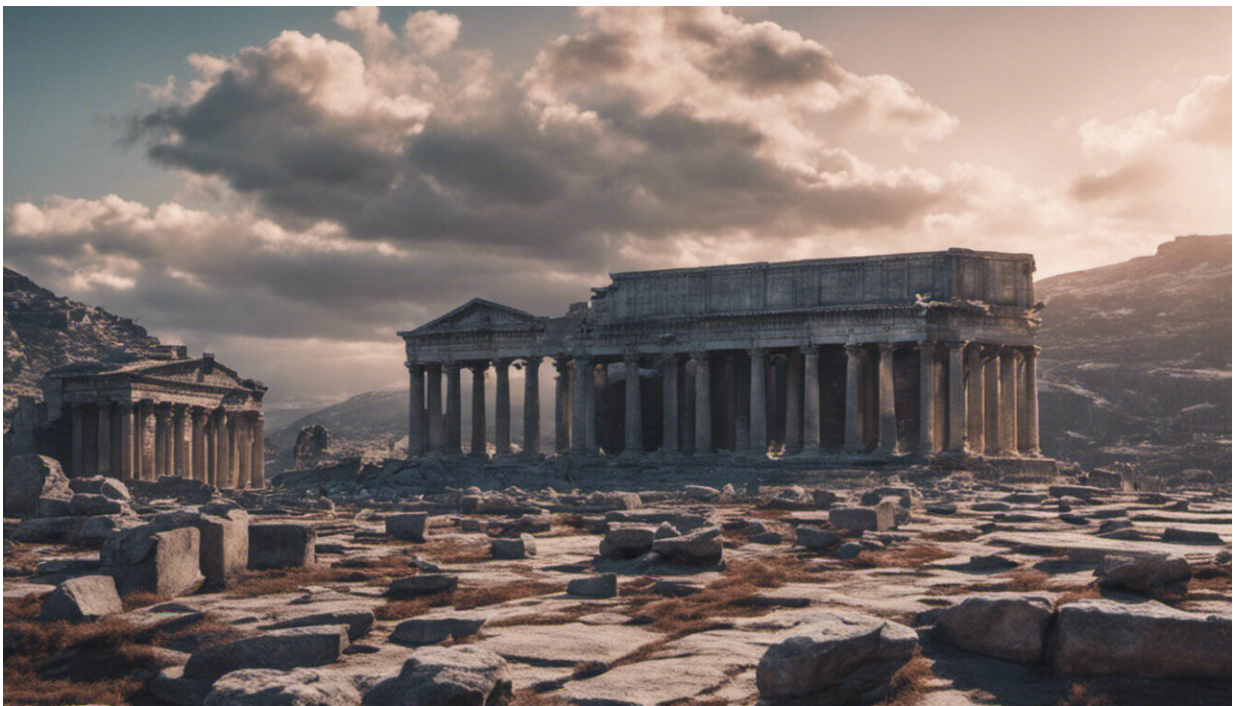


# How often do you think about the Roman empire? TikTok trend exposes the way we gender history

October 2 2023, by Dominic Janes

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

How often do you think about the Roman empire? This question, posed to men by their partners on social media app TikTok, has led to a storm of viral videos. Women are amused to discover the answer is often "every day," or at least "several times a week."

The Roman empire, like other periods of human history, had approximately the same numbers of men and women. But its power structures were notably patriarchal and military.

This may be why it is of great interest to men. As Mary Beard, the British classical historian, [suggested](#) when she was asked about the trend, men's interest in the Roman empire might represent "a safe way of allowing yourself to be a bit macho —after all it was 2,000 years ago," in our more feminist contemporary society.

Cynthia Boaz, a political science professor, offers [a more critical slant](#): "I'm guessing most of the men who say they think about it all of the time are probably white, cis men. And it's no coincidence, because the Roman Empire is one of the most patriarchal and hierarchical societies that has ever existed. It is the epitome, the pinnacle of white cis gender masculinity."

All this puts a distinct spin on the skit from the film [Monty Python's Life of Brian](#) (1979) which parodied a group of Jewish freedom fighters [who had to ask](#): "All right, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system and [public health](#), what have the Romans ever done for us?"

Boaz's underlying question is, perhaps, what did the western empires do for anyone other than white cis men? From this perspective, it is hardly surprising that women are not spending as much time thinking about the Roman empire.

## **Is the teaching of history gendered?**

In my experience of university teaching, the title of the course seems to strongly influence the gender balance of the class.

I have taught in art history departments where the courses were mostly attended by women (art appreciation being often seen as [feminine](#) and in history departments where there was, by contrast, a rough gender balance. Indeed, [women are an overall minority](#) in university history teaching.

I never tried to run a class called "War and Rule from Rome to Washington DC," but I know from experience that I just have to put the word "gender" in a course title to see the men evaporate. I once gave a seminar on this subject to a survey methods course at master's level and was faced by a stony-faced group of men sitting at the back with their arms crossed defensively.

It turned out, on talking to them, that they were deeply uncomfortable about being there because they thought gender history was all about attacking men. And this challenge extends beyond my classroom. [Researchers at the global education organization IREX](#) have found that men and boys devalue spaces and activities they associate with feminine gender roles, leading to a loss of economic and educational opportunities.

From my perspective, the gendering of subjects is so rampant in our society that is crucial that people learn about it, whether in school or university. I explore this during an introductory class by getting my undergraduates to draw images they associate with the period they are to study.

In my Georgian Britain class, despite that being the height of the male-run slave trade, images of ladies drinking cups of tea hugely outnumber men in uniform. That is certainly not the case when the topic is, say, Nazi Germany or the Battle of Britain.

The success of the Netflix TV series [Bridgerton](#) shows the public's

appetite for a sanitized vision of the 18th century, for example. The society it depicts includes an upper class that is female empowered and race-inclusive in ways that speak to contemporary cultural politics more than to strict historical accuracy.

It is not just historical periods, but also countries and even languages that are powerfully gendered in popular culture. How else to explain the fact that women consistently outnumber men in French and Italian classes, but [not in German](#) ones?

In the past this was often put down to supposed differences between Latin languages being intuitive and Germanic ones analytical. Today we are more likely to say that the key factor is [gender stereotyping](#).

The underlying point about the TikTok Romans trend is that it illustrates what popular images of the past can do for us. They may serve as a safe space for the displacement of fantasies of unfettered masculinity, or as an incubator of toxic thought.

Either way, the popularity of the meme is a testament to the power of the classical tradition in its broadest sense to shape contemporary western culture. And to influence who precisely chooses my history classes.

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