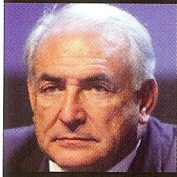


WHAT'S NEW?

SUMMERTIME, AND THE LIVING IS... A BIT TENSE



DOMINIQUE
STRAUSS-KAHN



JULIUS CAESAR



CAESAR'S PALACE,
LAS VEGAS



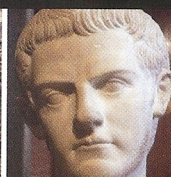
DIOCLETIAN'S
PALACE, SPLIT,
CROATIA



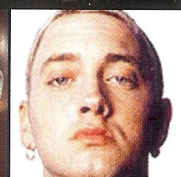
ROMAN
COLOSSEUM



LONDON OLYMPIC
STADIUM



CALIGULA



EMINEM

By Peter O'Brien

During the dog days of summer, some of us have the time and the inclination to lament the state of the world. Take your pick – the flailing EU, political unrest, religious extremism, culture wars – there's a lot to choose from.

Perhaps it is both wise and comforting, though, to take a very deep breath and remember that we have seen similar societal, political and economic tumult before, and more-or-less survived.

The Roman era brought us the elegant wisdom of Virgil and Ovid, and classic architecture that still stands and impresses. But it also brought us borrowed credit and government waste on a massive scale, gluttony and gambling of epic proportions, every type of sexual excess, notions of exceptionalism that would make any President-in-waiting blush with pride, as well as pan-handling, graffiti and scatological insults of the first order.

Think that infantile or idiotic entertainments dominate our lives now? It's instructive to remember that the three-tiered Circus Maximus, home to jugglers, fortune-tellers, plays and horse races, could hold 250,000 people at a time when the population of Rome was about 1,000,000. Festivals and Ludi, the public games put on to entertain the population and keep their minds off hunger, political corruption and the staggering costs of war in the provinces, sometimes occupied 180 days of the year, a mere pittance compared to the 2012 Olympic Games. And let's not forget that the Colosseum opened around 80 CE with a gladiatorial spectacle lasting 100 days.

Worried that our age is overrun by violence and senseless wars? Plutarch reminds us that after one civil war battle in northern Italy the corpses were piled higher than the eagle standards (maybe 10-12 feet), because of course in Roman civil wars no prisoners were taken. And in 71 BCE, Marcus Crassus, in celebrating his victory over the slave revolt led by Spartacus, crucified 6,000 slaves along the Appian Way between Rome and Capua.

Perhaps you are worried about piracy off the coast of Somalia or other hotspots that threatens vital international shipping routes. Various Roman historians remind us that during the height of the Roman Empire there were perhaps 20,000 pirates in the Mediterranean, and their presence was so pervasive that the sea was often all but closed to commercial traffic.

For staggering government-sanctioned waste and sexual extravagances that make recent scandals wither in comparison, read Suetonius on the "insolence, lust, luxury, and greed" of Nero,

or on the "appalling deeds" and "shamelessness" of Caligula, or on the "ingenious and unpredictable" cruelty of Domitian. For an all-consuming exceptionalism, read Cicero as he describes himself and his home city of Rome in his famed Catiline speeches, especially where he documents his "unambiguous signs from the immortal gods, under whose guidance I have arrived." For an update on the scale of gambling and gluttony and mud-wrestling and cross-dressing and witchcraft 2,000 years ago, don't miss Horace, Apuleius and Ovid.

And to reassure yourself that obsessing over fashion really has never gone out of fashion, read Seneca the Elder and his comments on "the luxury of this generation" which has led, it seems, only to "idle" and "sluggish" youth who seem to care only for "sleep and apathy" and the need to "crimp their hair" and spend all their time "grooming themselves."

For scatological and sexual insults that are breathtaking in their crudeness – and that make the various *Jackass* and *Hangover* movies seem downright docile – you really can't do much better than Catullus, although Martial's epigrams come close. (Sorry, you'll have to seek out those quotations for yourself.)

All of this is, of course, to say nothing of tumult in Libya (see CNN or Virgil's *Aeneid*), and the troubles with Greece (follow the IMF website or read Plautus's comedies), and that small chunk of land on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean that seems to be constantly at war within itself (read *The Jerusalem Post* or *The Annals* by Tacitus).

Intertwined with and fixated on our own time and space, we may perhaps find some solace in recalling that the frivolities and violences and stupidities of our age were present, in abundance, in other ages. Two thousand years ago Juvenal documented the "thousand risks of this terrible city, Rome," which included public belching, the stench of body-odor, traffic-jams, muggings in the streets, inflation, and living beyond our means on borrowed credit.

Here's some advice for those enjoying down-time during these lazy days of summer, especially if your unwinding brings on unbidden concerns about the troubling state of our current world: relax, we've seen all this, and worse, before. We'll get through this too. **A**

Peter O'Brien, the Editor of *Argyle*, is currently writing a book about studying Latin with his teenaged daughter.