NO PREP

Roman Archaeology Under Your Feet

Sites Across Europe

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Roman Archaeology Under Your Feet: Sites Across Europe

The Empire That Never Really Ended

The Roman Empire controlled territory that today encompasses over forty countries. Wherever Roman legions marched and Roman administrators settled, they built in durable materials — stone, brick, and concrete — and left behind a physical record that has survived to the modern era. The result is that Roman

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The Empire That Never Really Ended

The Roman Empire controlled territory that today encompasses over forty countries. Wherever Roman legions marched and Roman administrators settled, they built in durable materials (stone, brick, and concrete) and left behind a physical record that has survived to the modern era. The result is that Roman archaeology is not confined to museums or excavated sites: it is literally present beneath the streets and buildings of virtually every major city in Western Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. London, Paris, Cologne, Vienna, Lyon, Seville, Lisbon, Istanbul, Beirut, and Amman were all significant Roman cities. Their modern street grids often follow Roman originals. Their oldest churches sometimes stand on the foundations of Roman temples. This ubiquity creates a distinctive set of archaeological challenges and opportunities. Urban archaeology (conducted beneath and between occupied modern buildings) requires different techniques, different timelines, and different relationships with city governments and the public than field excavations in open countryside. It is archaeology conducted in the gaps, in the windows opened by construction projects, in the basements of new buildings, and in the moments when a city pauses long enough to let the past speak.

Londinium: Rome Under the City of London

When the Romans invaded Britain in 43 CE, they established a supply base on the north bank of the Thames at a point where the river could be bridged: the origin of what would become London. Roman London (Londinium) grew rapidly into the administrative capital of the province of Britannia, surrounded by a defensive wall whose course still shapes the street plan of the City of London today. The location of the original Roman bridge, roughly where London Bridge stands now, determined the pattern of roads radiating out from the city that has persisted for two

thousand years. Modern construction in London's financial district, the City, regularly encounters Roman remains. The Bloomberg headquarters, built between 2010 and 2017, uncovered one of the most significant Roman finds in London's history: the remains of the Temple of Mithras, originally excavated in 1954 and now reconstructed in the building's basement. The construction project also yielded 405 Roman writing tablets, including what may be the earliest written document found in London, a commercial contract dated 57 CE. The Bloomberg tablet collection has been called one of the most important archaeological discoveries from Roman Britain in decades.

Leptis Magna: Rome in North Africa

The Roman forum, triumphal arches, temples, theater, and baths at Leptis Magna in modern Libya are among the best-preserved Roman monuments anywhere in the world, arguably better preserved than anything in Rome itself. Leptis Magna was the birthplace of Emperor Septimius Severus (reigned 193-211 CE), and he lavished the city with buildings that transformed it into one of the grandest cities of the Roman world. After the city's decline and abandonment in the seventh century CE, desert sand covered and protected the monuments for over a thousand years, preserving them in remarkable condition. The archaeological significance of Leptis Magna extends beyond its monuments. It demonstrates that Roman civilization was genuinely multicultural, not an Italian or even European export, but a system that produced emperors from North Africa, military commanders from the Danube, poets from Spain, and administrators from Syria. Septimius Severus spoke Latin with an African accent that Romans reportedly found amusing and never lost. That the greatest building campaign in Leptis Magna's history was ordered by an African emperor is a corrective to any assumption that Roman civilization belonged only to Mediterranean Europeans.

Nimes and Baalbek: Temples That Survived

In Nimes, in southern France, a nearly intact Roman temple called the Maison Carrée stands in the center of the modern city, surrounded by modern shops and restaurants. Built in the first century BCE, it survived because it was continuously used — as a church, a stable, an archive, and eventually a museum. The Pont du Gard aqueduct bridge, thirty kilometers away, survived because it was converted to a toll bridge in the medieval period. Continuous use, paradoxically, was sometimes the best

preservative of Roman structures in France and Spain, where the transition from Roman to post-Roman use was relatively smooth. At Baalbek in modern Lebanon, the Romans built some of the most enormous temples in the ancient world on a site already sacred in the local religious tradition. The Temple of Jupiter at Baalbek incorporated stone blocks weighing over 800 tons — among the largest building stones ever used in history — whose quarrying and transport remain subjects of scholarly debate. The site was sacred to local deities before Rome arrived, was incorporated into the Roman religious system, became a Christian pilgrimage site, was converted to a mosque, and today functions as an archaeological park and concert venue. Its history is a compressed lesson in how the same space can hold multiple civilizations in sequence.

Why Roman Archaeology Shapes Modern Cities

The presence of Roman remains beneath modern cities is not merely a historical curiosity — it has practical consequences for how cities develop and how they understand themselves. In Rome, thousands of archaeological restrictions limit what can be built and where; the city's development is substantially controlled by what lies underground. In London, the Bloomberg Temple of Mithras reconstruction has become a major tourist attraction in the financial district, connecting city workers and visitors to a past two thousand years deep. In Nimes, the Maison Carrée still dominates the city center, influencing the architecture around it and the city's sense of its own identity. The Roman legacy in architecture is particularly pervasive. The neoclassical style that swept Europe and America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a conscious return to Roman architectural vocabulary: columns, pediments, rotundas, arches, and domes. The United States Capitol, the British Museum, the French Pantheon, court buildings across the Western world — all speak a Roman architectural language. Roman law, Roman administrative concepts, and Roman Christianity shaped the institutions of the Western world so thoroughly that separating 'Roman' from 'Western' heritage is essentially impossible. Roman archaeology is not the study of something finished. It is the archaeology of where we are still living.

Key Information: Roman Sites Across Europe

Site / Location	Significance
Londinium (London, UK)	Roman provincial capital; walls still shape City of London street plan
Bloomberg Site (London)	Revealed Temple of Mithras and 405 writing tablets, including earliest London document
Leptis Magna (Libya)	Best-preserved Roman city; birthplace of Emperor Septimius Severus
Maison Carree (Nimes, France)	Nearly intact first-century BCE Roman temple still standing in city center
Baalbek (Lebanon)	Temple of Jupiter with 800-ton stone blocks; multi-civilizational sacred site
Pont du Gard (France)	Roman aqueduct bridge; survived as medieval toll bridge; now UNESCO site
Septimius Severus	African-born Roman Emperor (193-211 CE) who rebuilt his hometown Leptis Magna
Urban Archaeology	Excavation in gaps opened by construction in occupied modern cities

Case Study: Kaveh and the Bronze Helmet

Kaveh Bakhtiari has been a tunneling engineer for the London Underground for nineteen years. He has seen a lot of unexpected things come out of the ground beneath London: Victorian water mains, medieval plague pits, Saxon timber structures. But this morning is different. At 6:40 AM, the excavation crew working on a new station extension in the City breaks through into a layer of dark, compacted earth that looks different from the surrounding clay. One of the workers calls him over. Lying at an angle in the soil, partially exposed, is something bronze. Kaveh knows the procedure. He has done it before. He calls work to a halt, calls the site archaeologist from the Museum of London, takes photographs from multiple angles without disturbing anything, and marks the precise location in the site grid. While he waits for the archaeologist, he tries to estimate from the size and shape of the bronze object what it is. The curved rim. The cheek guard. 'It's a helmet,' the site archaeologist says when she arrives, thirty-five minutes later. 'Military. Roman, first or second century CE.' She photographs it from every angle before carefully lifting it from the earth. Kaveh will not make his scheduled tunnel breakthrough this week. He knew that the moment he stopped the machines. He finds, looking at the helmet now in the archaeologist's hands, that he does not mind.

1. How does Kaveh's situation reflect the challenges and procedures of urban archaeology described in the reading?

2. What does the discovery of a Roman military helmet under a London construction site tell us about the depth of Rome's historical presence in modern cities?

Multiple Choice

1. Why did many Roman structures in France and Spain survive better than those in Rome itself?

a) Medieval laws in France and Spain specifically protected Roman monuments

b) French and Spanish stone was far more resistant to weathering than Italian stone

c) Continuous use as churches, stables, and bridges paradoxically preserved them

d) The buildings were less grand and therefore less targeted by stone quarriers

2. What is significant about the fact that Emperor Septimius Severus was born in North Africa?

a) It shows that North Africa was Rome's most loyal province during civil wars

b) It demonstrates that Roman civilization was genuinely multicultural, not purely European

c) It shows that Rome extended military service to non-European peoples

d) It explains why Leptis Magna had much better quality building materials than Italian cities

3. What makes the Bloomberg construction site in London particularly significant archaeologically?

a) It contained remains of Roman public baths showing sophisticated hypocaust heating systems in Roman Britain

b) It revealed the Temple of Mithras and 405 Roman writing tablets including the oldest document from London

c) It uncovered the original Roman bridge foundations across the Thames

d) It confirmed the location of Londinium's original forum and market

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Leptis Magna	A) Lebanese site with enormous Roman temples on 800-ton stone blocks; sacred across multiple civilizations
2. ___ Maison Carree	B) Remarkably preserved Roman city in Libya; birthplace of a Roman emperor
3. ___ Baalbek	C) Excavation conducted in the gaps and construction windows of occupied modern cities
4. ___ Septimius Severus	D) Nearly intact first-century BCE Roman temple still standing in Nimes, France
5. ___ Urban archaeology	E) Roman emperor born in North Africa who lavished monumental buildings on his home city

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The Bloomberg construction project in London uncovered the Temple of _____ and 405 Roman writing tablets.

2. Leptis Magna was the birthplace of Emperor _____ Severus, who ordered a massive building program there.

3. The Temple of Jupiter at _____ in Lebanon used stone blocks weighing over 800 tons each.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Why does the reading argue that Roman archaeology is not the study of something finished? Do you agree?

2. What does the story of Leptis Magna tell us about assumptions people sometimes make about Roman civilization?

3. How does urban archaeology differ from traditional field archaeology, and what specific challenges does it face?