

Meldy meets the Romans



By

Mr and Mrs Sproulle

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“Good morning, students!” said Ms Ocsett.

“Good morning, Ms Ocsett!” chorused Meldy’s class.

“Today we will start learning about the Romans. As you know, Britain was once part of the Roman empire.”

“Please, Miss! Is that why there are so many pizza restaurants?” asked Tamzin.

“Well, no. Pizza wasn’t invented then. They liked eating dormice.”

“Yuck! The poor little things!” swept through the class.

“They kept them in jars in their kitchens and fed them up ready for the pot.”

“That’s so mean!” said Meldy.

“They were larger than our native species. Some escaped and their descendants still live around North London.”

“Did they have animal rights protesters then?” asked Becca.

“There is no record of that but they kept slaves. A lot of ancient British people ended up as slaves in the Roman Empire.”

“I wish I had slaves,” said Clemency. “Then I wouldn’t have to clean my room. Meldy, you could be my slave!”

“No! You could be mine!” joked Meldy.

“Slavery was, and still is, a very cruel system. These days we value human rights and slavery is illegal in Europe and most other countries.”

“Please, Miss,” asked Becca. “What did the Romans use slaves for?”

“Good question! They were everywhere. Some slaves were worked very hard on farms and down mines while others worked in households and ran businesses for their owners. Some slaves became experts like accountants.”

“Is your mum a slave, Clemency?” asked Meldy. “She’s an accountant.”

“She works like one. She never stops!” sighed Clemency.

“One reason for expanding the Roman Empire was to capture more slaves. They were sold in slave markets and slave traders became rich. It was perfectly acceptable then but not now.”

“Could they ever be set free?” asked Meldy.

“Good question. Yes, they could. Sometimes a slave owner would free a slave so that the ex-slave, or freed man, could expand their own business. Some became very wealthy. They would always be indebted to their former owners and give them some of their wealth.”

“Did many slaves get their freedom?” asked Becca.

“Probably not that many. Most would have had a hard life and may have died young. Freeing a slave was called ‘manumission’.”

“Please, Miss,” asked Becca. “They had baths as well, didn’t they? We saw an amazing one in Bath.”

“Yes, they valued cleanliness and would often go to the baths. Everyone could go - that is citizens and freed slaves.”

“Even the British people?” asked Meldy.

“Yes, because eventually everyone who wasn’t a slave became a Roman citizen. Interestingly, a thousand years after the Romans left, bathing was no longer the fashion.”

“Did people smell then, Miss?” asked Tamzin.

“People used to use perfume to disguise the smell.” More “Yucks!” from the class.

“How did they heat the water without electricity?” asked Becca.

“They had furnaces. Hot gases went underneath the hot baths through a ‘hypocaust’ system and then they rose up inside the walls through chimney tiles.”

“What did they burn in the furnaces?” asked Meldy.

“Wood. A large bath complex could get through ten tons of wood in a day;

that’s enough to keep most modern houses warm for years.

Underground tunnels were used to bring in cartloads of it to keep the fires going. Forests of trees would be cut down to provide it. Some Roman emperors built huge bath complexes to keep their citizens happy.”

“How do we know so much?” asked Meldy.

“The ruins of some of these complexes still exist around the empire. The beautiful interiors were all stripped out but the massive walls often survived.”

“Why did they want the interiors?” asked Becca.

“The Romans used the best materials like marble. These last for centuries so later on they were reused in palaces and churches.”

“Did they find baths in Pompeii?” asked Meldy.

“Good point. Yes they did. As you may know, the Roman town of Pompeii was buried by a volcanic eruption in the year 79 AD. Historians have learnt so much from the excavations there. Roman bread was even discovered in one of the ovens!”

“Did they eat it?” joked Clemency.

“No, it was carbonised by the heat from the volcano.”

“My dad carbonises our bread when he makes toast!” laughed Tamzin.

“The eruption killed thousands at the time but it has meant many things have been preserved that would not normally have survived.”

“What sort of things, Miss?” asked Becca.

“Furniture, fruits and nuts, children’s toys and even scrolls!”

“What’s a scroll, Miss?” asked Meldy.

“Well, things were written down on very long rolls. You had to unroll them to read what was written.”

“What did they write?” asked Clemency.

“Unfortunately, they were carbonised by the heat. They break into small pieces if you try to unroll them.”

“So, we won’t ever know what they said?” asked Clemency.

“There is an exciting new technique using computers. The scrolls are scanned and the presence of ink is detected. They can then follow the rolled up scroll from start to finish to capture the written words. It takes a lot of time though.”

“Miss,” said Meldy, “may I ask a question?”

“Of course, Meldy.” Ms Ocsett was pleased at the interest her students were showing. When she tried to talk about the Romans to some of the teachers at the school they didn’t seem interested at all.

“The Romans invaded Britain, didn’t they. Did they walk all the way from Rome?”

“The senior officers could have come from Rome but the soldiers didn’t. Two of the legions that came here were raised in Germany, one in Spain and one in Eastern France. People were paid to be soldiers and on completion of their service they were given Roman citizenship.”

“Wasn’t it a dangerous job? Fighting all the time?” asked Becca.

“Yes, but more probably died from infections and diseases than from the fighting. They had medics attached to the legions but they didn’t have the benefit of modern medicine.”

“How long did the foreign soldiers stay here?” asked Meldy.

“Some married local women and started families. When they retired they often chose to stay near to their legion rather than go back to their home countries. Britain became quite international with people from all over the Empire!”

Meldy was looking at a map of the Empire on the classroom wall.

“Did soldiers come here from North Africa or the Middle East?” she asked.

“Yes. Grave markers have been found that prove it. Also, bronze plaques have been found that were given to retired soldiers. These detailed their service history and stated their entitlement to citizenship.”

“Were they written in Latin, Miss?” asked Tamzin.

“Yes, so they can be read!” Ms Ocsett was getting excited now as she had once seen something that she wanted to share with the students. “Also, letters were sent from Britain to Rome. We still have some of those. The writing is on wood which survived when exposed to certain damp environments. One letter is an invitation to a birthday party near Hadrian’s Wall!”

“Who wrote it, Miss?” asked Clemency.

“People often used scribes but the sender, a woman, wrote on the bottom in her own hand, ‘Please come’! It’s the earliest known example of a woman’s handwriting in Britain!”

“That’s amazing!” enthused Becca. “It’s so lucky it survived!”

“Isn’t it!” replied Ms Ocsett. She was really warming to this group of students.

“Why did Hadrian build the wall up there?” asked Meldy. She had an image of Hadrian with a load of cement and a load of bricks, just like when her dad built a wall in their garden.

“Sections were built by different legions. There are different theories about why it was built but I think it was defensive. That is to keep out the northern peoples who tended to raid and steal things from people further south!”

“What else could it have been for?” asked Tamzin.

“Perhaps to keep a check on who came into the Empire and to show people how powerful the Roman Empire was,” suggested their teacher.

Meldy looked again at the map of the Roman Empire on the wall. “They must have been very powerful! They had a really big empire!”

The lesson was drawing to a close but Ms Ocsett had a surprise for the students.

“Next week we will have a visit from the Germania legion from Germany. You can all dress up like Roman soldiers and learn about army life.”

“Can we dress up in helmets and armour?” asked Becca.

“Yes, you can,” said their teacher.

Next week the students trooped out to the playing field and there were the soldiers standing to attention.

“What’s the woman doing with the donkey?” asked Meldy.

The centurion, with a plume in his helmet, explained. “Few people realise that the army relied on people other than soldiers. They needed supplies and Julia with her donkey represents all the people who risked their lives in support of the soldiers.”

“What a lovely donkey! Can we go over to see him?” asked Tamzin and Clemency.

After the students had made a fuss of the donkey the soldiers demonstrated some tactics. They showed how to perform a “testudo” formation. This involved protecting their fronts and heads with shields. This could then be used to protect them from aerial projectiles.

“What does ‘testudo’ mean?” asked Meldy.

“It’s Latin for ‘tortoise’,” explained Ms Ocsett.

Eventually the students got to dress up as soldiers. “Let’s have a sword fight!” said Becca to Meldy.

“Be careful! Don’t hurt yourselves or damage the equipment!” cried Ms Ocsett.

The centurion explained how the soldiers fought in formation with shields close together in what was known as a ‘shield wall’. The swords would poke through the gaps. He also told them how they built roads so they could move around much faster. Many of our modern roads follow the routes of Roman roads.

“Why were Roman roads so straight?” asked Meldy.

“A straight line is the shortest distance between two points. A soldier’s life was hard. When on campaign, they had to build defensive ditches and wooden palisades around their camps every night. This was done before they could have anything to eat. Next day, before they left, they would burn the remaining parts of their camp so their enemies couldn’t use it!”

That evening Meldy’s father Mr Wagley asked her if she had learnt anything new at school.

“We saw a testudo!” she said.

“A what?”

“That’s ‘tortoise’ in Latin.”

“I didn’t know you were learning Latin.”

“I’m not really. We’re learning about the Romans. Did you know they ate mice?”

“Yuck!” chorused her twin sisters Kick and Popster.

“And they were really clean!” said Meldy.

“The mice?” asked Kick.

“No! The Romans! They had hot baths but they cut down all their trees to heat the water. And they didn’t eat pizza! The army that invaded us were really Germans, French and Spanish, not Romans!”

“Just like London in the summer!” laughed Mr Wagley. “Are you enjoying this topic?”

“There’s Roman dormice living near London. Can we go and rescue them?”

The twins rolled their eyes. First it was squirrels, then it was pigs. Dormice? Whatever next?