To all intents and purposes, the civilization which the Romans spread all over the Mediterranean lands, considerable areas of Europe, and the Middle East was essentially Hellenic in inspiration. All educated Romans could speak and write both Latin and Greek and they often saw themselves as consciously improving upon their Greek models.

In philosophy, Rome derived all from Greece; its literature sought to scale those heights the Greeks had reached, while in art their major native contribution lay in the emphasis they laid on solid realistic portraiture.

Only in law and architecture (of which engineering was considered an intrinsic component) were the Romans actual creators and inventors. This in itself was symptomatic of a people who prided themselves in their practical response to the business of living.

The corpus of Roman laws, which by the second and third centuries AD included a vast accumulation of legal practice and commentary, would provide the basis for the medieval codices that led directly to all modern legal codifications. Borrowing Greek ideas, the Romans created a practical tradition based on commonsense treated in a scientific manner where laws were applied according to recorded precedents.

The Romans' architectural achievements were truly unique and spectacular. Their feats in town-planning, hydraulic engineering, road building, and bridging were of an astonishing nature in size and scope — a number of modern towns still draw their water, for example, from Roman aqueducts, while some Roman roads and bridges are still in regular constant use. Their invention of concrete, domed vaults, and arches gave a new shape and size to buildings.

And yet while the Greek achievement was so patently 'man-sized', with man the measure of all things, Roman civilization had a grossness and materiality about it that still assails the viewer in front of its ruins. A most telling contrast can be seen in the two civilizations' conceptions of sport: the athletic rivalry of the Greek city-states for which even hostilities would come to a temporary truce and the blood-soaked inhuman spectacles of man killing man or exotic beast, regularly served to distract a potentially dangerous populace.

Still the Roman contribution to Western civilization was of a most permanent kind to all countries and regions that it came into contact with, unless it had been
violently uprooted by the barbarian hordes who, by a process of attrition, were to bring about the final collapse of the empire. The Romans succeeded, for the first and only time in history, to unite all the Mediterranean lands. The Mediterranean itself they self-consciously called the *mare nostrum*.

The Latin people who were to found Rome has crossed the Alps about a thousand years BC. Some of them eventually chose for a settlement a highly strategic site where the Tiber could be forded and also reached by sea-going vessels. In 509 BC the Romans expelled the Etruscan dynasty which had conquered them and founded a republic in which the very idea of kingship was anathema.

Rome had to fight for its existence till about 250 BC. However, owing to ‘ruthless endurance, thoroughness, self-confidence, diplomacy, hardiness, and military discipline’ the small city grew to dominate first Italy, and then most of the known world. Still she came to rule her vast territories almost reluctantly, in a search for greater security and commercial interests through the clever use of force and favour.

By extending citizenship rights, Rome carefully wove a network of allies who obtained protection in return for military service. These military obligations (*munera*) gave rise to the status of the *municipium* that was to prove the principal means of Roman expansion. More distant peoples were offered alliances with internal freedom, again in return for military duties.

However, if self-interest decreed it, Rome was not averse to taking up the sword. No sacrifice would then be too excessive as the Romans would single-mindedly pursue total victory. The Punic Wars only came to an end when the city of Carthage was razed to the ground on a false pretext after more than a hundred years of continual warfare. In less than 150 years (282–146 BC), Rome became the undisputed mistress of the Mediterranean, first subduing Carthage and then the Hellenistic east.

This rapid expansion and attendant wealth brought about a domestic tension with the rise of a new wealthy class (*equites*) that led to a long-drawn-out period of bloody civil wars, out of which a strong man, Augustus, would emerge as the undisputed master of the vast empire the Republic had assembled.

Augustus’ was essentially a Mediterranean empire — a political and economical unit unified by a sea which greatly facilitated the communications and the trade that were the empire’s lifeblood. Rome’s tolerant policies towards its provinces made possible the continuation of native traditions and disposed the inhabitants positively towards Roman law, justice, and administration thus providing a firm ground for the diffusion of Hellenistic culture that would survive the departure of the Roman legions. Indeed Roman rule encountered relatively little opposition or divisive localism, except for the deeply-set religious nationalism of the Jews. The resultant fusion was a completely new administrative concept.
Roman civilization was based on the cities — each with its own market-place (forum), amphitheatre, and baths — through which government and administration operated. The countryside could thus be left ‘untouched’, though Roman values and ideals would certainly seep and leave their mark. The granting of Roman citizenship, the right to which eventually was extended to most of the provinces, guaranteed the just application of law, free of the whims of local despots. Paul of Tarsus could appeal and travel all the way to Rome for the safeguarding of his rights as a Roman citizen.

Augustus’ reforms, however, were carefully presented as a return to old Republican virtues. He made pretence of exercising his authority through the Senate and the assembly of the people of Rome. Even when this system would degenerate into the worst excesses of autocratic rule, the emperors would still employ the sigla SPQR (the Senate and the People of Rome) as the visible assertion of authority. For himself, Augustus merely accepted the title of princeps (first citizen).

The empire’s real power was the army — a superbly-drilled body of fighting men and engineers that carried the benefits of Roman civilization to the most far-flung corner. It never exceeded the number of 28 legions (about 150,000 men) following the German débâcle of Quintilius Varus in AD 9, with perhaps a similar number of auxiliaries. In times of unrest, the army would assume the role of kingmakers, thereby compounding the general confusion and sapping the empire’s strength. No less than twenty emperors would rule in the forty-nine years from 235 to 284.

The conditions prevailing in the empire would make possible the development and growth of a religion — an offshoot of Judaism — that owed its origin to an obscure teacher and a handful of men in one of the empire’s most refractory regions. Its effective rise coincided with the spread of mystery cults but it had the great attractions that it was open to all, even non-Jews, women, and slaves. It held out a promise of forgiveness and salvation and every believer could have a role and feel a sense of belonging to a larger community. Constantine’s recognition of Christianity and its acceptance as the official state religion in 380 were fundamentally political decisions. Christianity had spread and obtained strong holds, and its excellent organizational abilities could, and did, prove indispensible to the secular arm. In the long run, Christianity would ensure the propagation of Roman values to most corners of the world, even long after the disappearance of Rome’s empire.

As to why such a vast organization did disappear, a number of explanations have been put forward. Perhaps the most generally known is Edward Gibbon’s theory that Rome’s ‘decline and fall’ was the inevitable result of its own sheer size and the ‘weakening’ brought about by the acceptance of Christian values
such as humility, patience, and piety instead of the pristine military and tough virtues that had brought it about. Though this explanation is obviously in agreement with Gibbon's rationalistic approach, it overestimates Christianity's role and the fact that one half of the empire, Christianity and all, would survive for almost another thousand years.

Another tentative explanation, clearly fallacious, considers the empire as a biological organism that grows, matures, and inevitably decays. Also too simplistic or outrightly misleading are such pseudoscientific theories that try to see the empire crumbling as a result of 'racial corruption' or widespread lead poisoning. The former is obviously the product of mentalities that could justify evil ideologies, while the latter is absolutely not borne out by any significant skeletal analysis.

More enlightening are Ferdinand Lot's socioeconomic theories that seek to explain the events as the consequences of the interruption of the supply of cheap slave labour and the resultant breakdown of an economy that had never progressed much beyond the agricultural level; in turn this brought about a critical downturn in whatever trade, industry, and commerce there could have been, while the disappearance of the tax-base would weaken the State. Regular manumission of slaves was, however, common at various times of the empire without such cataclysmic results; moreover Lot underestimates the political factors that could have contributed to the end-result.

In recent years these political explanations have gained a much wider acceptance among historians. Rome's chronic inability to form a stable form of government that could stand up to pressures, both from without and within, was only momentarily overcome with Diocletian's division of the empire into two separate administrative halves in 285.

Perhaps it would be even reasonable to question the very idea of a 'decline and fall' seeing that empires may change and develop rather than disappear into nothingness. Certainly many aspects of the Roman world survived and helped shape the medieval world and our own world in turn. In addition to the visible remains, Roman law left its definite imprint on Europe's legal and political systems, and through them on most of the world's systems. The Latin language unified the intellectuals of Europe for more than a thousand other years and the study of its literature helped form attitudes and patterns of thought that are still with us.