

# How often should you think about the Roman Empire? – A mixed methods situated answer



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Hugo Bonin -*tutkijatohtori*

**Rome wasn't built in a day**, but some people sure think about it every day. As you might have heard recently, there was a trend on social media where women ask the men in their life: "[how often do you](https://www.jyu.fi/fi/blogikirjoitus/how-often-should-you-think-about-the-roman-empire-a-mixed-methods-situated-answer)

[think about the Roman Empire?](#)". The men's answers vary from "all the time" to "frequently", to which the women generally respond with bewilderment.

This viral phenomenon was quickly co-opted by various companies for clout, such as United Airlines offering discounted flights to Rome. I, however, was a bit puzzled by the whole thing. What did this mean in terms of popular understandings of history? What is Rome's place in the collective imagination of the West? What is behind these alleged gender differences? And, more importantly, was all of this just a plot to hype the upcoming *Gladiator 2* movie?

To answer these questions, I needed data. So, as a good social scientist, I designed a really simple survey (asking how much respondents thought about Rome, their gender, discipline and era of specialization) and sent it on the History and Ethnology department listserv. In the end, 35 people answered. I present first some of the main results. Afterwards, I'll raise three points about the gendered, political and historical elements of this trend.

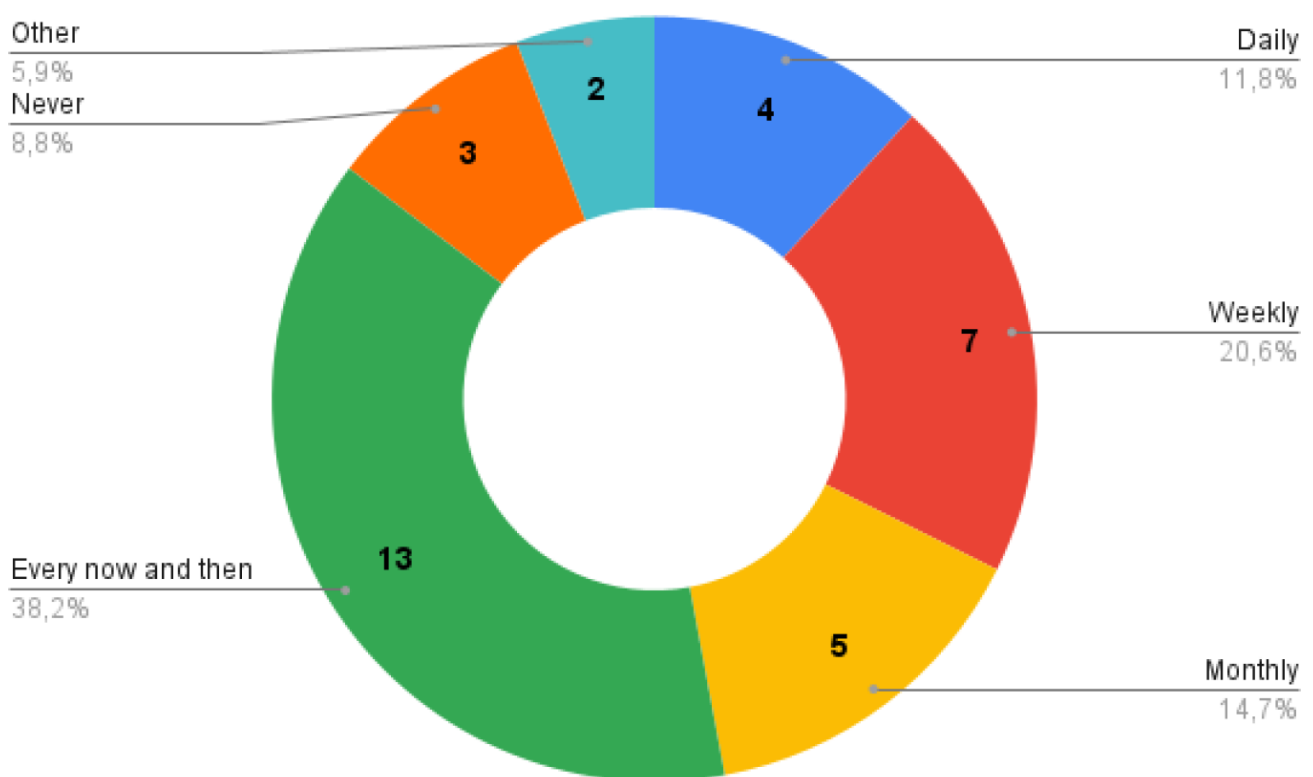


Figure 1 - Answers to Q1 - "How often do you think about the Roman Empire?"

The overall results show that about 40% of the people in HELA think about Rome 'every now and then'. If we add the 'frequent' categories together (daily and weekly), we get around a third of the respondents – which seems to be above average since a [Buzzfeed poll](#) had around 25% for similar answers. Not such a surprising finding for a department where a lot of people study history.

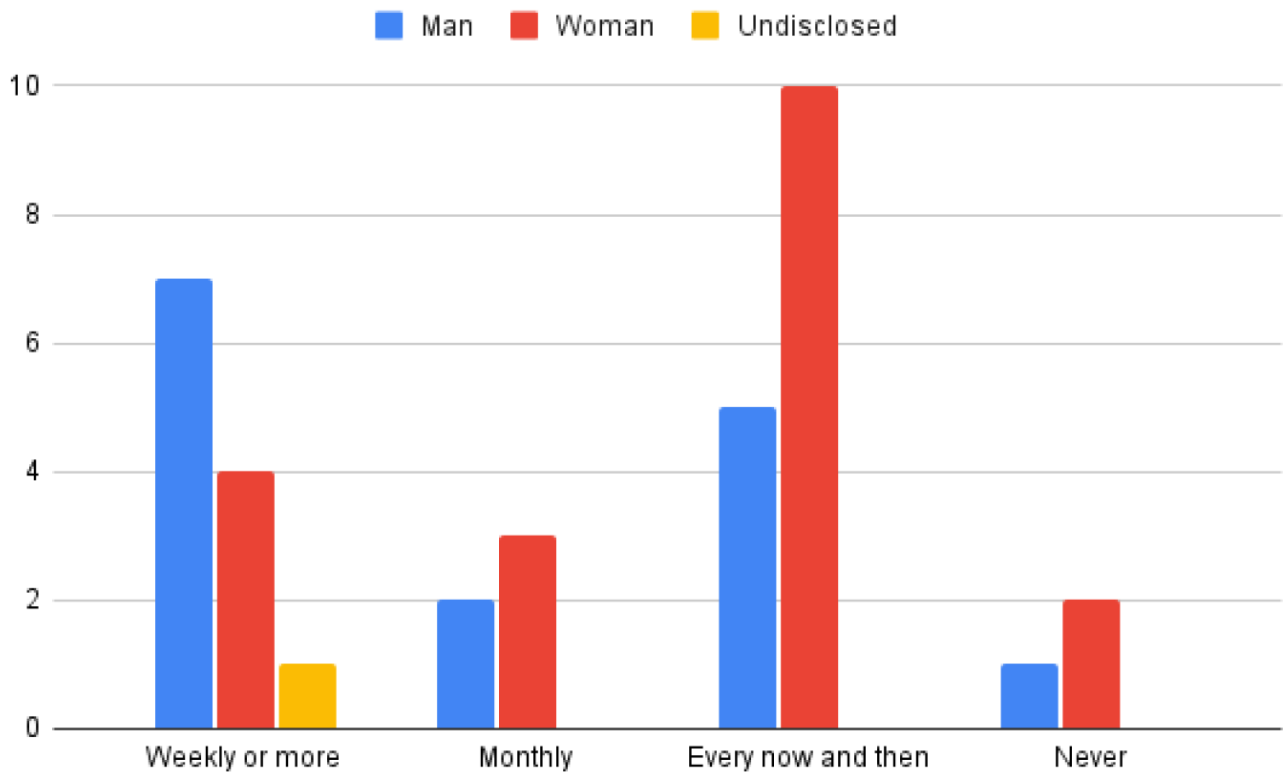


Figure 2.1 - Gender breakdown. "Other" answers were added to "Every now and then".

Figure 2 shows the gender breakdown of the answers. We notice that when adding 'daily' and 'weekly' answers together, men outnumber women, while 'infrequent' categories are dominated by women. But is this due to the respondents' discipline? This survey was mostly popular amongst the historians, who made up 80% of the respondents. Amongst the historians only, Figure 2 looks like this:

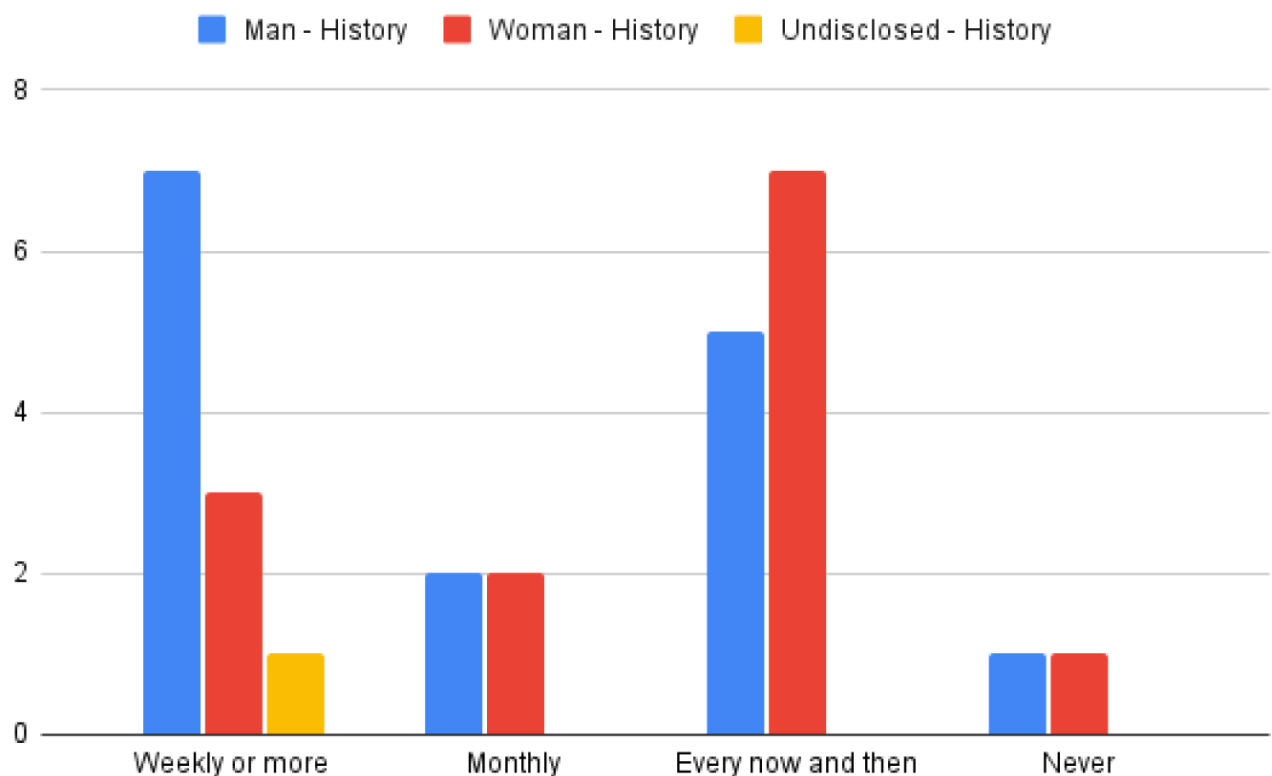


Figure 2.2 - Gender breakdown, historians only.

So, no dramatic changes. And the area of specialization did not seem to matter, since nobody (!) worked on Antiquity and around 80% of the participants worked on modern or contemporary topics. Of course, these questions are rather basic and many more variables could have been added.

Nonetheless, as our little experiment shows, and as multiple [analyses have highlighted](#), there is clearly a gendered dynamic at play. Men seem to think about the Roman Empire quite often, at least more than women. The latter appear to have other priorities: perhaps given the still disproportionate share of [emotional](#) and [domestic labor](#) women do, their time to daydream is limited? Or is it spent thinking more about [personal security](#) and building a safer future? Plus, as Roman society was particularly hierarchical and patriarchal, women might prefer other models when thinking about the past. Of course, as any ~~gender~~ historian would point out, finding a period where women's living conditions were superior, or even somewhat equal, to men's is pretty impossible.

On a more personal level, when I encountered this trend, my first thought was: "the Empire? Never think about it. The Republic? Often". As someone working on democracy, it is indeed difficult to not encounter Rome, or more precisely some mythological version of it. In countries like the United States and France, 18th and 19th century republicans explicitly invoked the Roman model, while European colonial projects often made reference to the imperial era. Even the British, with their "[mixed government](#)" claimed some parentage with the Roman ideal of balancing popular, aristocratic and monarchic tendencies (through the institutions of the assemblies, the Senate and the consuls). Actually, while most Western countries now describe themselves as "democratic" and refer to Ancient Greece as the birthplace of "democracy", we should remember that the roots of our representative institutions are much more elitist and antidemocratic. Rome – either in its aristocratic or imperial form – was the model, [not Athens](#).

Finally, one could wonder: "should you be thinking about the Roman Empire every day"? Indeed, given the links of Roman heritage to both Italian fascism and [German nazism](#), such an obsession could be worrying. More broadly, this trend reflects some of the problems of our collective imagination of the past: too often focused on "great men", military conflicts and power structures - not to mention its racist underpinnings. Nonetheless, I believe this trend should be of interest to historians: it shows us that people have historical reflections and interrogations, sometimes daily. The issue is rather how we can help develop these popular understandings of history into more fully fledged critical insights. How do we cultivate this interest into historical knowledge? Or, to put it bluntly: how can we help people think about the Roman Empire in ways that are conducive to our collective emancipation, and not to idealize its militaristic and authoritarian features?

Big questions, I know. But we can rejoice in the fact that at least the Roman Empire is not the worst empire

**one could be thinking about every day.**



When he says he thinks about the Roman Empire every day



When he says he thinks about the Holy Roman Empire every day

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Jaa tämä artikkeli



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Tutkijatohtori



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