

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

Everyone in the empire had to obey the Roman laws, and these were usually very strict. People who committed crimes were punished severely, to try to discourage other people from breaking the law. The poor received particularly brutal punishments, which were often carried out in public, but rich and important citizens were normally treated less harshly.

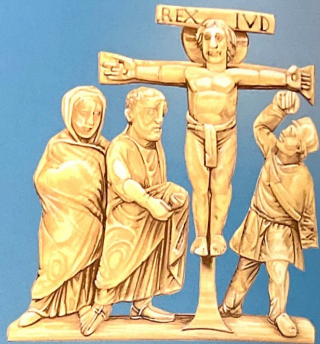
ON TRIAL

Anyone accused of committing a crime was put on trial in the town law court, known as the basilica. There was a judge in charge of each trial, and a group of citizens - known as the jury - decided whether the accused person was innocent or guilty. At important trials, as many as 75 citizens could be asked to serve on the jury at the same time.

If the accused could afford it, he paid a lawyer to speak for him. Lawyers often made dramatic and

emotional speeches on behalf of their clients, to win over the jury. Sometimes, people who were on trial mearred their hair with ashes and wore ragged clothes to make the jury feel sorry for them.

This is a sculpture of Cicero, the most famous of all Roman lawyers. His style of speaking and writing was imitated for centuries after his death.



This ivory carving shows Jesus Christ being crucified. The Romans executed many people in this agonizing way.

PAINFUL PUNISHMENTS

When someone was found guilty of a crime, the judge decided what the punishment should be. Wealthy Romans who hadn't paid debts or taxes were often given huge fines. If they couldn't pay up, they lost their property and their citizenship. Other wealthy criminals were exiled to distant parts of the empire and forbidden to come home.

Many poor people were sold as slaves, forced to work in mines deep underground, or sent out into the arena to fight as gladiators. Some punishments were even worse, and lots of criminals were beheaded, torn apart by wild beasts, or put to death on a cross. (See page 365 for more about the legal system.)