

# ANCIENT ROMAN TIMEPIECES

Ancient Roman Art  
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## INTRODUCTION

Romans imitated technology from cultures they encountered across the Mediterranean, and Roman sundials and timekeeping were developed from their encounters with these other cultures.

Romans didn't use minutes or seconds like modern times. The hour was their smallest unit of time, but their hour was different than today's. Ancient Romans adopted an Ancient Egyptian method of timekeeping by dividing the daylight and darkness into 12 increments each. This method ignores the season and changing length of day. In Rome, an hour was closer to 45 minutes in winter and 75 in summer. Being 15 minutes late would not be a cause for impatience or complaining.



Portable Sundial. Smithsonian Magazine.

## KLEPSYDRA

Klepsydra were typically used in interiors, at night, and on cloudy days. A bowl of water with a small hole in the bottom was inspired by Greek traditions in law courts. The vessel would pour out the water over a predetermined length of time. This practice is similar to modern sand hourglasses and functioned similar to a timer used in modern times. Unlike the sundial, a klepsydra kept a consistent length of time despite shifting latitudes and seasons.

## SUNDIALS

Sundials are surfaces with an object casting a shadow throughout the day to indicate the time based on the sun's position relative to the shadow-casting object. Dials were created primarily for the public, and most are found in marketplaces, temples, or other public locations.

## OBELISKS

Most obelisks come in pairs but have been separated from their neighbors over time. Obelisks functioned as a sundial, and acted as a gnomon casting its shadow onto the ground often marked with a web of lines that indicated the time of day according to the season.