About Rome: From Republic to Empire

The Geography of Ancient Rome

The city of Rome is located along the Tiber River near the center of the Italian Peninsula. The city began in ancient times as a series of settlements on seven hills near the Tiber. Those hills were later named Aventine, Caelian, Capitoline, Esquiline, Palatine, Quirinal, and Viminal. Over time, the hilltop villages united and became the city of Rome. According to legend, Rome began on the Palatine Hill, settled by the mythical Romulus.

The Tiber River connects Rome to the Mediterranean Sea via the Tyrrhenian Sea on the peninsula's west coast. This access allowed for the development of extensive trade networks that included Europe, Africa, and the East. The river also provided drinking water to the city and surrounding areas.

At its height, the Roman Empire stretched from the island of Britain to North Africa and Southwest Asia. Rome controlled most of the land surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, leading the Romans to call the great body of water *Mare Nostrum*, or Our Sea.

The Etruscans

The Etruscans were an Indigenous people of the Italian Peninsula. They originally settled between the Tiber and Arno Rivers and, through conquest, extended their territory north to the Po River and south to include Rome and Latium, and then even farther south to the area of the Bay of Naples. However, there was no united Etruscan empire. Etruscan civilization, like many other ancient societies, was made up of independent city-states. The city of Rome was governed by the Etruscan Tarquin dynasty until the Tarquin kings were overthrown.

The Romans adopted many elements of Etruscan culture, including Etruscan clothing, architecture, and religious practices. The Etruscans also left behind tombs and wall paintings, from which scholars have been able to piece together their knowledge of Italy's first great civilization.

The Roman Republic

For many years, Rome was ruled by Etruscan kings, but in 509 BCE, the people rose up against a particularly cruel king named Tarquin and drove him out. In that same year, the Romans set up a republican government, a government in which the people chose their own rulers to serve for fixed periods of time. At the time, this was a new type of government. It would later be imitated by many other countries, including the United States.

In these early years, Roman society was divided into two classes, patricians and plebeians. The former were rich property owners; the latter, who were the majority of Romans, were farmers, craftworkers, merchants, and traders. Slaves were outside the social structure—lower even than the plebeians.

Two officials, called consuls, headed the republic; one managed the civil administration, and the other the military. Both consuls could issue edicts, or commands, that had the force of law; however, one consul could override the other's edict by stating, "Veto," which is Latin for "I forbid." Thus the two consuls functioned as checks and balances on each other. The ideas of the veto and of checks and balances are two of the many Roman political ideas that are part of American government today.

The co-consuls were elected to one-year terms by the Senate, a body of three hundred male citizens who, like the consuls, were patricians. All lesser officials, including judges, were patricians. The plebeians had no say in the early republic.

Over time, however, the plebeians broke the patrician hold on power. In 450 BCE, the plebeians succeeded in getting the government to codify Roman law and inscribe it on twelve tablets in the Roman Forum. Plebeians were then able to know if patrician judges were administering the laws that affected them correctly and fairly. A little later, the government established the Comitia Tributa, or Tribal Assembly, from which ten tribunes were chosen to protect the rights of the plebeians. The tribunes were representatives and protectors of the plebeians. They could veto any law that they believed was not in the best interest of the plebeians. Eventually, plebeians also won the right to be consuls, to sit in the Senate next to the patricians, and to be elected to all other offices. In this way, the plebeians gradually secured a role for themselves in the political affairs of the Roman Republic.

The Punic Wars

Under the republic, Rome began to grow by conquering neighboring territories. By 340 BCE, Rome dominated central Italy. By 295 BCE, it dominated the entire peninsula. Gradually, Rome began to acquire territory elsewhere in the Mediterranean.

Rome's major rival for power in the Mediterranean was the North African city of Carthage, founded by Phoenician traders. Between 264 and 146 BCE, the Carthaginians and Romans fought three wars. They were called the Punic Wars after *Punicus*, the Roman word for Phoenician.

The First Punic War lasted more than twenty years, from 264 to 241 BCE. When the war began, the Carthaginians had a navy of several hundred ships, and Rome had no navy at all. The Romans realized they could not defeat Carthage or extend their influence in the Mediterranean without a formidable navy. They captured a Carthaginian ship and built a navy full of replicas. The Romans ultimately won the war, but not without losing thirty thousand citizen-soldiers. One of the fruits of victory was control of the island of Sicily.

The Second Punic War (218–201 BCE) lasted for seventeen years and is noteworthy for the exploits of Hannibal, a Carthaginian general. Hannibal was the son of a general who had fought in the First Punic War and remained bitter about Carthage's defeat. According to one story, when Hannibal was still a boy, his father made him swear that he would fight against Rome until his dying day. Hannibal kept that promise. Rather than invade Italy by sea, Hannibal, who had already subdued most of the native peoples of southern Spain, decided to march from Spain to Italy. He marched across the mountains into Gaul (modern-day France) with a force of forty thousand soldiers, eight thousand horses, and thirty-seven elephants trained for use in battle. A few months later, he led his army across the Alps—an astonishingly bold and dangerous maneuver. Hannibal lost almost half of his men and most of his attack elephants on the treacherous icy slopes of the Alps. Despite the losses, Hannibal moved south into the Italian Peninsula. The Carthaginians defeated the Romans in a series of battles and, after a victory at Cannae, seemed to be on the verge of taking Rome. In that battle, the Romans lost about fifty-six thousand soldiers, while Hannibal lost only about six thousand. Somehow, Rome managed to survive these great defeats and rebuild its army. Rome even launched a bold counterattack, sending an army to Africa to threaten Carthage. This army won several major victories against the Carthaginians in Spain and forced Hannibal to return to Africa. The Romans met Hannibal's army south of Carthage, at Zama. This time, the Romans won, although Hannibal himself escaped. The peace treaty that ended the Second Punic War allowed Carthage to keep its lands in Africa, but the Carthaginians were required to give up Spain and pay Rome a large amount of money. They were also forbidden to begin any war without Rome's permission.

Carthage rebuilt itself after the Second Punic War, and for many years they abided by the terms of the treaty, not declaring any wars. Nevertheless, many Romans worried that Carthage was still a threat. They continued to think this even after Hannibal committed suicide rather than turn himself over to Roman authorities. For many years, a Roman senator named Cato concluded every speech he made in the Senate, no matter what the subject, with the Latin words *Carthago delenda est*, or "Carthage must be destroyed." When Carthage eventually did declare war on another country, the Romans sent an army to besiege Carthage. This was the beginning of the Third Punic War (149–146 BCE). The Romans surrounded Carthage and starved the city into surrendering. Then they

burned the city. They killed many of the city's inhabitants and sold others into slavery. This decisive victory made Rome the strongest power in the Mediterranean.

Julius Caesar and the End of the Republic

The causes that led to the decline of the republic date back to the unrest caused by Rome's campaigns of conquest. Once Carthage fell, Rome controlled—either by conquest or alliances—the Mediterranean region from Spain in the west and France in the northwest, across Asia Minor and Southwest Asia, to Egypt in the south.

The resulting wealth brought many problems and much civil unrest to Rome. Citizen-farmers, who had been the backbone of Roman society, found themselves displaced from their farms because of debt. Wealthy patricians bought up their land and created huge estates worked by enslaved labor. (Many slaves had been taken during the Punic Wars.) Without land and jobs, the farmers drifted to the cities, where large numbers of unemployed already lived. When attempts were made to reform the society and government, corrupt officeholders, including senators accustomed to bribery, sought to protect their positions. In time, mob violence erupted—and then civil wars—brought about in part by ambitious men who wanted power for themselves.

One of these ambitious men was Julius Caesar, who, although a patrician, had always sided with the reformers. Along with Pompey, a fellow general, Caesar was able to silence the opposition and gain control of the government. In 59 BCE, Caesar was made a consul. In the following year, as proconsul, or governor, of Rome's Alpine provinces, he launched an invasion of Gaul, which is now France. In the Gallic Wars, which lasted from 58 to 51 BCE, Caesar and his army were victorious.

Pompey grew jealous of Caesar and had the Senate order him to disband his army and return to Rome. A defiant Caesar led his army to the Rubicon River, the dividing line between Gaul and Italy, and ordered them to cross the Rubicon. This was equivalent to leading an army against Rome, and ever since, people have used the expression "crossing the Rubicon" for any dramatic decision from which there is no turning back.

After Caesar crossed the Rubicon, civil war erupted between the supporters of Caesar and Pompey. Pompey fled to Egypt after his defeat at the Battle of Pharsalus in 48 BCE. He was killed by the Egyptians, who mistakenly thought that was what Caesar wanted. While in Egypt, Caesar helped Cleopatra take the throne from her younger brother. Caesar also became romantically involved with Cleopatra. But he could not stay in Egypt too long; he had to solidify his grasp on power.

Once Pompey was dead, Julius Caesar began a series of campaigns to secure Roman power in the Mediterranean. He also instituted a number of reforms. He established public works programs to employ the jobless and gave public land to the landless. He made tax collection more efficient and extended citizenship to members of the empire outside of Italy. He worked to reduce the debt obligations of the poor and sponsored the construction of new roads and buildings.

Julius Caesar also introduced a new calendar. The Julian calendar was based on the work of Egyptian astronomers. It added an extra day every fourth year for leap years. This calendar was used by most of Europe for the next 1,600 years. It was replaced by the Gregorian calendar, itself a refinement of the Julian calendar, in 1582 CE.

The Assassination of Julius Caesar

Caesar gained so much power in Rome that many people feared he would declare himself king. His ambition and his reforms aroused envy and fear among members of the Senate. A group of sixty senators conspired to remove him. The leaders of this conspiracy were Brutus and Cassius. They assassinated Caesar in the Senate on March 15 (the Ides of March in the Julian calendar), 44 BCE.

Civil War

After Julius Caesar's death, three of his supporters took the lead in the struggle against Brutus and Cassius. The first was Marcus Antonius, or Mark Antony, a well-known general who had served as consul with Caesar some years earlier and who set up a public funeral for Caesar. The second was Caesar's eighteen-year-old nephew, Octavian.The third was Aemilius Lepidus, who was quickly sidelined.

Antony and Octavian defeated Brutus and Cassius at the Battle of Philippi, in northern Greece. Brutus and Cassius both committed suicide when they saw they had been defeated. For many Romans, suicide was seen as a way to maintain honor after a military defeat and was preferred by some to the alternative of capture and possible humiliation.

Octavian and Antony divided the vast Roman territories into two parts, with Octavian controlling the western part from a base in Rome and Antony the eastern part from a base in Egypt, where he followed in Caesar's footsteps by starting a romance with Cleopatra. However, tensions soon broke out between the co-rulers. As a gesture of political unity, Antony agreed to marry Octavian's sister, Octavia, but his real love was Cleopatra. Antony eventually left Octavia and went back to Cleopatra.

Octavian was angered by Antony's treatment of his sister, among other reasons, and he did not want to share the empire. Ultimately, Octavian led an army against Antony and Cleopatra. The decisive battle was a naval battle, fought at Actium in 31 BCE along the coast of Greece. During the battle, Cleopatra's ships turned and fled, and Antony followed. Octavian was victorious and pursued the defeated lovers to Egypt. Antony committed suicide, and later Cleopatra also committed suicide, perhaps by allowing a poisonous asp to bite her. These twin suicides put an end to one of history's great romantic affairs and left Octavian in control of the Roman world.

Caesar Augustus and the Beginning of the Roman Empire

After the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra, Octavian became the sole ruler of Rome. Four years later, a grateful Senate awarded him the honorary title of Augustus, meaning sacred. While Octavian, now Augustus Caesar, was careful to retain the structures of the republican government, he was actually given much more power than officeholders in the old republic would have had, and his tenure is considered the beginning of the Roman Empire and of two hundred years of peace known as the Pax Romana.

Under Augustus, the Senate continued, but much of its power was assumed by the emperor. It no longer chose who would rule; it only confirmed the reigning emperor's choice of successor (or the military's candidate in the years when the army held power). Rome's assemblies still functioned for a while, but they only elected the candidates supported by Augustus. Even the assemblies ceased to function after Augustus died.

Among the reforms that Augustus Caesar instituted were the creation of a civil service, establishment of a postal system, introduction of new coins for money transactions, and reform of the census in order to make the tax system more equitable. He set up what may have been the world's first fire department. He also had roads constructed throughout the empire to allow for communication between Rome and the provinces.

Augustus also worked to revitalize Roman religion. He promoted religious festivals and encouraged worship of the Roman gods as a way of building loyalty to the state. Augustus funded the renovation and construction of ornate religious temples as well as civic buildings. He is said to have boasted that he "found Rome brick and left it marble."

Last but not least, Augustus was a great patron of the arts. It was during his reign that Virgil wrote the *Aeneid*, an epic poem meant to glorify Augustus and Rome. Other writers also flourished during the reign of Augustus, including Horace, Livy, and Ovid.

Life in the Roman Empire

A Roman city typically had a forum. This was an open central marketplace or public square that contained shops and government buildings, such as law courts and temples to the city's chief deities. In addition to being the center of commercial activity, the forum was the center of civic participation for a city.

A city usually had several temples built in honor of a variety of deities. Cities also had public baths, which featured hot and cold pools, exercise grounds, and gardens. The baths, like the houses of the rich, had running water. Most people, though, obtained their water from public fountains on the streets. They lived in crowded, noisy dwellings, similar to modern-day apartment buildings of four or five stories, while the wealthy few lived in luxurious villas, attended to by slaves. Slavery was common among the Romans, and often slaves were people who were captured in battle.

Favorite forms of entertainment included gladiatorial combats, wild-animal contests, and chariot races. Many gladiators were professionally trained slaves who fought each other, often to the death. However, if a gladiator made a particularly skillful showing, the crowd might cheer for his release. In Rome, the Colosseum, a huge arena that seated forty-five thousand, was the site of such events. Chariot races were held in round or oval structures called circuses. Spectators sat in tiers around the sides and cheered on their teams. The Circus Maximus in Rome was the largest circus in the empire. The phrase "bread and circuses" refers to the practice of providing grain and games to the poor of the cities to keep them fed and occupied so that they would not revolt. Such welfare, warned critics of the emperors and the upper classes, only masked the growing problems caused by the uneven distribution of wealth.

The massive Colosseum and Circus Maximus are typical of the Romans' skill at engineering. The Romans used domes to cap their buildings and arches to support walls and ceilings. Arches supported Roman bridges and aqueducts, the stone structures that carried water from the country into and through the cities. The Romans also used stone to pave their roads, which they laid throughout the empire. Many modern European roads are based on the old Roman roadbeds, and some aqueducts are still standing.

Christianity and the Roman Empire

The birth of Jesus took place during the rule of Augustus. Jesus was tried and executed (by crucifixion) in Palestine, which was a Roman province under the supervision of Roman official Pontius Pilate. But these events, which were to have such a profound effect on later history, remained completely unnoticed in most parts of the Roman Empire. It was only later, during the first century CE, that the followers of Jesus began to move out from Palestine and through the Roman Empire, preaching about Jesus and making converts. The apostle Paul traveled throughout the Roman Empire, preaching the necessity of faith in Jesus as savior.

For the most part, the Roman Empire was tolerant of the religious practices of its far-flung subjects. Many emperors followed the policy of the emperor Trajan (98–117 CE), who ordered that the Christians be left alone as long as they did not disturb the general peace.

However, when times were bad, it was easy to blame the Christians because they were different. They worshipped a god other than the Roman deities, and because they believed there was only one God, they refused to make sacrifices in honor of the pagan gods whom most Romans worshipped. Also, they did not worship the emperor. Christians' refusal to participate in religious ceremonies that were supported by the state and the emperor was often used as grounds for persecution. The first persecution of the Christians actually predated Trajan. In 64 CE, the emperor Nero, seeking to deflect criticism from himself, blamed the Christians for the great fire that had destroyed large parts of Rome.

The emperor Diocletian, who ruled from 284 to 305 CE, brought the full resources of the empire to bear against Christianity. He was determined to make Christians give up their practices. Many Christians died for their faith;

sometimes, they were forced to fight as gladiators against one another or against wild animals. However, the persecution of the Christians did not have the desired effect. Those who were executed were hailed as martyrs, and the religion continued to spread in spite of the persecution.

A Divided Empire

In addition to persecuting the Christians, Diocletian divided the Roman Empire into two parts, a Greek-speaking east and a Latin-speaking west. The eastern portion included Greece and Southwest Asia, and the western portion Italy, France, Spain, Britain, and North Africa. Diocletian ruled the eastern portion, and a co-emperor ruled the west.

Constantine became emperor of the west in 306 CE. He converted to Christianity in 312 CE on the battlefield, thus becoming the first Christian emperor. In 313 CE, he and the emperor in the east agreed to allow Christians to practice their religion openly. The document that granted religious toleration to Christians is known as the Edict of Milan. From this point on, Christianity moved rapidly from being a minority religion, subject to persecution, to being the official religion of the empire and the religion of a growing number of Roman citizens.

Ultimately, Constantine defeated the emperor in the east and ruled both portions of the empire. In 324 CE, he built a new eastern capital, Constantinople, on the site of the former Greek city of Byzantium. Over time, this city astride the Bosporus became the center of a vast trading network that connected Europe with the Middle East and the rest of Asia and brought the empire great riches. Today, this city is known as Istanbul.

The Decline of the Western Roman Empire

While Roman emperors continued to rule in the east, Roman rule in the west began to collapse in the 300s and 400s CE. The collapse happened not overnight but over the course of many years, and as a result of many factors.

The best-known factor, and the most obvious symptom, was the invasion of western Europe by various so-called barbarian peoples, including the Huns, the Visigoths, and the Vandals. In 410 CE, the Visigoths, under the leadership of Alaric, sacked Rome. Many historians view this date as marking the end of the Roman Empire in the west. Although Roman emperors continued to be proclaimed, these men were really little more than puppets of powerful Germanic leaders. The last emperor in the west, Romulus Augustus, was deposed in 476 CE.

Ever since the sack of Rome in 410 CE, people have debated the reasons for Rome's decline. It is now generally accepted that no single factor caused the decline of the Western Roman Empire. The factors that contributed to the decline of the western empire can be grouped into four categories.

- **Military:** invasions by Germanic peoples; replacement of citizen-soldiers by mercenaries, which weakened the Roman legions
- **Economic:** heavy taxation; widening gap between rich and poor; use of slave labor, which blunted technological innovation
- **Social:** decline in traditional values, such as hard work and patriotism; corruption and dissolute lifestyles of many emperors; lack of social conscience among the upper class; social welfare ("bread and circuses") for the poor
- **Political:** widespread corruption among government officials; an increasingly authoritarian government; division of the empire into west and east

Although it is customary to speak of the "fall" of Rome, it may be more accurate to say that the Western Roman Empire slowly changed over time and was replaced by new customs, new languages, and new rulers. One civilization gradually gave way to another.

It is also important to bear in mind that there were elements of continuity as well as change. One of the most important elements of continuity was the Christian religion. Although the western empire collapsed, the Roman Catholic Church continued to function as a unifying force in the west, even after the last emperor was deposed. More and more, the Church became the stable organization in people's lives.

The Eastern Empire

For a thousand years after the fall of the empire in the west, the Byzantine Empire in the east continued to build on the base of ancient Greek and Roman traditions and culture. The Byzantine Empire was a significant force in European politics until 1453, when the city of Constantinople was captured by the Ottoman Turks.

Because of its location on international trade routes, Constantinople also received new cultural influences from the Middle East and other parts of Asia, which in turn blended with Greco-Roman traditions to create its own cultural heritage. For example, early Byzantine architects used the Roman dome in their buildings, but Byzantine artists later created a new art form featuring more arches and domes made of brick. The artists also found less naturalistic and more formal ways to represent religious figures from Christianity in their art.

Justinian

Justinian, who ruled from 527 to 565 CE, was the last emperor to attempt to rule both eastern and western portions of the former Roman Empire. His armies succeeded in routing Germanic invaders and retaking southern Spain, Italy, and North Africa. With his wife, Theodora, as coruler, Justinian governed the largest area that the Byzantine Empire would possess. Later emperors were unable to hold on to these gains.

One of the major accomplishments of Justinian was the codification of Roman law, the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, literally the body of civil law. All Roman laws, as well as the decrees of emperors and the writings of judges, were collected. The work outlived Justinian and was updated periodically by later emperors. By the 1100s CE, the Justinian code, as it became known, was in use in the Roman Catholic Church and in western European nations.