

Chapter 10: The Roman Empire

Introduction

When Octavian succeeded in defeating Marc Antony, he removed the last obstacle to his own control of Rome's vast territories. While paying lip service to the idea that the Republic still survived, he in fact replaced the republican system with one in which a single sovereign ruled over the Roman state. In doing so he founded the Roman Empire, a political entity that would survive for almost five centuries in the west and over a thousand years in the east.

This system was called the *Principate*, rule by the "First." Likewise, although "Caesar" had originally simply been the family name of Julius Caesar's line, "Caesar" came to be synonymous with the emperor himself by the end of the first century CE. The Roman terms for rule would last into the twentieth century CE: the imperial titles of the rulers of both Russia and Germany - "Tsar" and "Kaiser" - meant "Caesar." In turn, the English word "emperor" derives from *imperator*, the title of a victorious Roman general in the field, which was adopted as yet another honorific by the Roman emperors. The English word "prince" is another Romanism, from *Princeps Civitatis*, "First Citizen," the term that Augustus invented for himself. For the sake of clarity, this chapter will use the anglicized term "emperor" to refer to all of the leaders of the Roman imperial system.

Augustus

The height of Roman power coincided with the first two hundred years of the Roman Empire, a period that was remembered as the *Pax Romana*: the Roman Peace. It was possible during the period of the Roman Empire's height, from about 1 CE to 200 CE, to travel from the Atlantic coast of Spain or Morocco all the way to Mesopotamia using good roads and enjoying official protection from banditry and a common trade language. The Roman Empire was as rich, powerful, and glorious as any in history up to that point, but it also represented oppression and imperialism to slaves, poor commoners, and conquered peoples.

Octavian was unquestionably the architect of the Roman Empire. Unlike his great-uncle, Julius Caesar, Octavian eliminated all political rivals and set up a permanent hereditary

emperorship. All the while, he claimed to be restoring not just peace and prosperity, but the Republic itself. Since the term *Rex* (king) would have been odious to his fellow Romans, Augustus instead referred to himself as *Princeps Civitatus*, meaning “first citizen.” He used the senate to maintain a facade of republican rule, instructing senators on the actions they were to take; a good example is that the senate “asked” him to remain consul for life, which he graciously accepted. By 23 BCE, he assumed the position of tribune for life, the position that allowed unlimited power in making or vetoing legislation. All soldiers swore personal oaths of loyalty to him, not the republic, and having conquered Egypt from his former ally Mark Antony, Augustus was worshiped there as the latest pharaoh. The senate awarded Octavian the honorific *Augustus*: “illustrious” or “semi-divine.” It is by that name, Augustus Caesar, that he is best remembered.

Despite his obvious personal power, Augustus found it useful to maintain the facade of the republic, along with republican values like thrift, honesty, bravery, and honor. He instituted strong moralistic laws that penalized (elite) young men who tried to avoid marriage and he celebrated the piety and loyalty of conservative married women. Even as he converted the government from a republic to a bureaucratic tool of his own will, he insisted on traditional republican beliefs and republican culture. This no doubt reflected his own conservative tastes, but it also eased the transition from republic to autocracy for the traditional Roman elites.

As Augustus’s powers grew, he received an altogether novel legal status, *imperium majus*, that was something like access to the extraordinary powers of a dictator under the Republic. Combined with his ongoing tribuneship and direct rule over the provinces in which most of the Roman army was garrisoned at the time, Augustus’s practical control of the Roman state was unchecked. As a whole, the legal categories used to explain and excuse the reality of Augustus’s vast powers worked well during his administration, but sometimes proved a major problem with later emperors because few were as competent as he had been. Subsequent emperors sometimes behaved as if the laws were truly irrelevant to their own conduct, and the formal relationship between emperor and law was never explicitly defined. Emperors who respected Roman laws and traditions won prestige and veneration for having done so, but there was never a formal legal challenge to imperial authority. Likewise, as the centuries went on and many emperors came to seize power through force, it was painfully apparent that the letter of the law was less important than the personal power of a given emperor in all too many cases.



One of the more spectacular surviving statues of Augustus. Augustus was, among other things, a master of propaganda, commissioning numerous statues and busts of himself to be installed across the empire.

This extraordinary power did not prompt resistance in large part because the practical reforms Augustus introduced were effective. He transformed the senate and equestrian class into a real civil service to manage the enormous empire. He eliminated tax farming and replaced it with taxation through salaried officials. He instituted a regular messenger service. His forces even attacked Ethiopia in retaliation for attacks on Egypt and he received ambassadors from India and Scythia (present-day Ukraine). In short, he oversaw the consolidation of Roman power itself after the decades of civil war and struggle that preceded his takeover, and the large majority of Romans and Roman subjects alike were content with the demise of the Republic because of the improved stability Augustus's reign represented. Only one major failure marred his rule: three legions (perhaps as many as 20,000 soldiers) were destroyed in a gigantic ambush in the forests of Germany in 9 CE, halting any attempt to expand Roman power past the Rhine and Danube rivers. Despite that disaster, after Augustus's

death the senate voted to deify him: like his great-uncle Julius, he was now to be worshipped as a god.

The Imperial Dynasties

The period of the *Pax Romana* included three distinct dynasties:

1. The Julian dynasty: 14 – 68 CE - those emperors related (by blood or adoption) to Caesar's line.
2. The Flavian dynasty: 69 – 96 CE - a father and his two sons who seized power after a brief civil war.
3. The "Five Good Emperors": 96 – 180 CE - a "dynasty" of emperors who chose their successors, rather than power passing to their family members.

The Julian Dynasty

There is a simple and vexing problem with any discussion of the Roman emperors: the sources. While archaeology and the surviving written sources create a reasonably clear basis for understanding the major political events of the Julian dynasty, the biographical details are much more difficult. All of the surviving written accounts about the lives of the Julian emperors were written many decades, in some cases more than a century, after their reign. In turn, the two most important biographers, Tacitus and Suetonius, detested the actions and the character of the Julians, and thus their accounts are rife with scandalous anecdotes that may or may not have any basis in historical truth (Tacitus is universally regarded as the more reliable, although Suetonius's *The Twelve Caesars* does make for very entertaining reading). Thus, the biographical sketches below are an attempt to summarize what is known for sure, along with some notes on the scandalous assertions that may be at least partly fabricated.

When Augustus died in 14 CE, his stepson Tiberius (r. 14 – 37 CE) became emperor. While it was possible that the senate might have tried to reassert its power, there was no political will to do so. Only idealistic or embittered senators really dreamed of restoring the Republic, and a coup would have been rejected by the vast majority of Roman citizens. Under the Caesars, after all, the empire had never been more powerful or wealthy. Genuine concessions had been made to the common people, especially soldiers, and the only people who really lost out in the short term were the old elite families of patricians, who no longer had political power independent of the emperor (although they certainly retained their wealth and status).

Tiberius began his rule as a cautious leader who put on a show of only reluctantly following in Augustus's footsteps as emperor. He was a reasonably competent emperor for over a decade, delegating decisions to the senate and ensuring that the empire remained secure and financially solvent. In addition, he oversaw a momentous change to the priorities of the Roman state: the Roman Empire no longer embarked on a sustained campaign of expansion as it had ever since the early decades of the Republic half a millennium earlier. This does not appear to have been a conscious policy choice on the part of Tiberius, but instead a shift in priorities: the senate was now staffed by land-owning elites who did not predicate their identities on warfare, and Tiberius himself saw little benefit in warring against Persia or invading Germany (he also feared that successful generals might threaten his power, at one point ordering one to call off a war in Germany). The Empire would continue to expand at times in the following centuries, but never to the degree or at the pace that it had under the Republic.

Eventually, Tiberius retreated to a private estate on the island of Capri (off of the west coast of Italy). Suetonius's biography would have it that on Capri, Tiberius indulged his penchant for bloodshed and sexual abuse, which is highly questionable - what is not questionable is that Tiberius became embittered and suspicious, ordering the murders of various would-be claimants to his throne back in Rome, and sometimes ignoring affairs of state. When he died, much to the relief of the Roman populace, great hopes were pinned on his heir.

That heir was Gaius (r. 37 - 41 CE), much better known as "Caligula," literally meaning "little boots" but which translates best as "bootsie." As a boy, Caligula moved with his father, a famous and well-liked general related by marriage to the Julians, from army camp to army camp. While he did so he liked to dress up in miniature legionnaire combat boots; hence, he was affectionately dubbed "Bootsie" by the troops (one notable translation of the work of Suetonius by Robert Graves translates Caligula as "Bootikins" instead).

Even if some of the stories of his personal sadism are exaggerated, there is no doubt that Caligula was a disastrous emperor. According to the biographers, Caligula quickly earned a reputation for cruelty and megalomania, enjoying executions (or simple murders) as forms of entertainment and spending vast sums on shows of power. Convinced of his own godhood, Caligula had the heads of statues of the gods removed and replaced with his own head. He liked to appear in public dressed as various gods *or* goddesses; one of his high priests was his horse, Incitatus, whom he supposedly appointed as a Roman consul. He staged an invasion of northern Gaul of no tactical significance which culminated in a Triumph (military parade, traditionally one of the greatest demonstrations of power and glory of a victorious general) back in Rome.

Much of the scandalous gossip about him, historically, is because he was unquestionably the enemy of the senate, seeing potential traitors everywhere and inflicting waves of executions against former supporters. He used trials for treason to enrich himself after squandering the treasury on buildings and public games. He also made senators wait on him dressed as slaves, and demanded that he be addressed as "*dominus et deus*," meaning "master and god." He was finally murdered by a group of senators and guardsmen.

The next emperor was Claudius (r. 41 – 54 CE), the one unquestionably competent emperor of the Julian line after Augustus. Claudius had survived palace intrigues because he walked with a limp and spoke with a pronounced stutter; he was widely considered to be a simpleton, whereas he was actually highly intelligent. Once in power Claudius proved himself a competent and refreshingly sane emperor, ending the waves of terror Caligula had unleashed. He went on to oversee the conquest of England, first begun by Julius Caesar decades earlier. He was also a scholar, mastering the Etruscan and Punic languages and writing histories of those two civilizations (now lost, unfortunately). He restored the imperial treasury, depleted by Tiberius and Caligula, and maintained the Roman borders. He also established a true bureaucracy to manage the vast empire and began the process of formally distinguishing between the personal wealth of the emperor and the official budget of the Roman state.

According to Roman historians, Claudius was eventually betrayed and poisoned by his wife, who sought to have her son from another marriage become emperor. That son was Nero. Nero (r. 54 – 68 CE) was another Julian who acquired a terrible historical reputation; while he was fairly popular during his first few years as emperor, he eventually succumbed to a Caligula-like tendency of having elite Romans (including his domineering mother) killed. In 64 CE, a huge fire nearly destroyed the city, which was largely built out of wood. This led to the legend of Nero "playing his fiddle while Rome burned" - in fact, in the fire's aftermath Nero had shelters built for the homeless and set about rebuilding the roughly half of the city that had been destroyed, using concrete buildings and grid-based streets. That said, he did use space cleared by the fire to begin the construction of a gigantic new palace in the middle of Rome called the "golden house," into which he poured state revenues.

Nero's terrible reputation arose from the fact that he unquestionably hounded and persecuted elite Romans, using a law called the *Maiestas* that made it illegal to slander the emperor to extract huge amounts of money from senators and equestrians. He also ordered imagined rivals and former advisors to kill themselves, probably out of mere jealousy. Besides Roman elites, his other major target was the early Christian movement, whom he blamed for the fire in Rome and relentlessly persecuted (thousands were killed in the gladiatorial arena, ripped

apart by wild animals). Thus, the two groups in the position to write Nero's history - elite Romans and early Christians - had every reason to hate him. In addition, Nero took great pride in being an actor and musician, two professions that were considered by Roman elites to be akin to prostitution. His artistic indulgences were thus scandalous violations of elite sensibilities. After completely losing the support of both the army and the senate, Nero committed suicide in 68 CE.

Another note on the sources: what the "bad" emperors of the Julian line (Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero) had in common is that they violated the old traditions of *Romanitas*, squandering wealth and glorifying themselves in various ways, thus inspiring hostility from many elite Romans, the senate included. Since it was other elite Romans (albeit many years later) who became their biographers, we in the present cannot help but have a skewed view of their conduct. Historians have rehabilitated much of the rule of Tiberius and (to a lesser extent) Nero in particular, arguing that even if they were at loggerheads with the senate at various times and probably did unfairly prosecute at least some senators, they did a decent job of running the empire as well.

The Flavian Dynasty

In the aftermath of Nero's death, a brief civil war broke out. Four generals competed for the emperorship, supported by their armies. In the end, a general named Vespasian (r. 69 – 79 CE) seized power and founded a fairly short-lived dynasty consisting of himself and his two sons, known to history as the Flavians. The importance of Vespasian's takeover was that it reinforced the idea that real power in Rome was no longer that of the old power-broking families, but instead the armies; Vespasian had no legal claim to the throne, but his emperorship was ratified by the senate nevertheless. The emperor's major concern had to be maintaining the loyalty of the armies above all else, because they could and would openly fight to put their man on the throne in a time of crisis - this occurred numerous times in the centuries to come.

Vespasian was one of the great emperors of the early empire. He pulled state finances back from the terrible state they had been left in by Nero and restored the relationship between the emperor and the Roman elite; it certainly did not hurt his reputation that he was a successful general, one of the traditional sources of status among Roman leaders. He was also renowned for his openness and his grounded outlook. Reputably, he did not keep a guard and let people speak to him directly in public audiences. In an act of classic *Romanitas*, he started work on the famous Colosseum (known at the time as the Flavian Amphitheater) in Rome in order to provide

a grand setting for public games and performances. All of this happened in just a decade; he died of natural causes in 79 CE.



The outside of the Colosseum in present-day Rome.

Vespasian's older son Titus (r. 79 – 81 CE) had been groomed to follow his father and began as a promising and competent emperor. Unfortunately, almost as soon as he took the throne a volcano in southern Italy, Mt. Vesuvius, erupted, followed shortly by another huge fire as well as an epidemic in Rome. Titus struggled to aid victims of all three disasters, but was then struck by fever and died in 81 CE.

Vespasian's second son, Domitian (r. 81 – 96 CE), who was not "supposed" to take the throne, proved to be a terrible ruler. He created an atmosphere of terror in elite Roman circles in an effort to watch out for potential rebels, murdering senators and elites he suspected. He adopted a Caligula-like concern for glorifying himself (like Caligula, he insisted that he be addressed as "*dominus et deus*") and liked to appear before the senate in the armor of a Roman commander returning from victory. He was moralistic about both sex and the divinity of the emperors, instituting the policy that all oaths had to be sworn to the godhood of the emperor. About the only positive undertaking in his rule was major building projects, both for palaces for himself and public works (including roads and fortifications), and it is also worth noting that the empire remained under a stable administration during his reign. That noted, Domitian became increasingly paranoid and violent between 89 and 96 CE, until he was finally killed by assassins in the palace.

The "Five Good Emperors" and the Severans

Following the work of the great eighteenth-century English historian Edward Gibbon, historians frequently refer to the rulers of the Roman Empire who followed the death of Domitian as the "Five Good Emperors," those who successfully managed the Empire at its height. For almost a century, emperors appointed their own successors from the most competent members of the younger generation of Roman elites. Not least because none of them (except the last, to disastrous consequences) had surviving direct heirs of their own, each emperor would adopt a younger man as his son, thereby ensuring his succession. Rome prospered during this period under this relatively meritocratic system of political succession. It was under one of these emperors, Trajan, that the empire achieved its greatest territorial expanse.

One of the important aspects of the behavior of the "good emperors" is that they fit the model of a "philosopher-king" first described by Plato centuries earlier. Even though monarchy had been repugnant to earlier Romans, during the period of the Republic, the good emperors tried to live and act according to traditional Roman *Romanitas*, undertaking actions not only for their own glorification but for the good of the Roman state. The borders were maintained (or, as under Trajan, expanded), public works and infrastructure built, and infighting among elites kept to a minimum.

Trajan's accomplishments deserve special mention, not only because of his success in expanding the Empire, but in how he governed it. He was a fastidious and straightforward administrator, focusing his considerable energies on the practical business of rule. He personally responded to requests and correspondence, he instituted a program of inexpensive loans to farmers and used the interest to pay for food for poor children, and he worked closely and successfully with the senate to maintain stability and imperial solvency. The fact that he personally led the legions on major military campaigns capped his reign in the military glory expected of an emperor following the rule of the Flavians, but he was remembered at least as well for his skill as a leader in peacetime.

The next two emperors, Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, did not win comparable military glory, but they did defend the borders (Hadrian gave up Trajan's conquests in Mesopotamia to do so, recognizing that they were unsustainable), oversaw major building projects, and maintained Roman stability. Hadrian spent much of his reign touring the Roman provinces, particularly Greece. It was clear by his reign that the emperor's authority was practically limitless, with both emperors issuing imperial proclamations known as "rescripts" while away from Rome that carried the force of law.

This period of successful rule eventually broke down when the practice of choosing a competent follower ended – the emperor Marcus Aurelius, a brilliant leader and Stoic philosopher (161 – 180 CE) named his arrogant and foolhardy son Commodus (r. 177 – 192 CE) his co-emperor three years before Aurelius's death. Storm clouds had already been gathering under Aurelius, who found himself obliged to lead military campaigns against incursions of Germanic barbarians in the north despite his own lack of a military background (or, really, temperament). He had, however, been a scrupulously efficient and focused political leader. His decision to make Commodus his heir was due to a simple fact: Aurelius was the first of the Five Good Emperors to have a natural-born son who survived to adulthood. As emperor, Commodus indulged his taste for debauchery and ignored affairs of state, finally being assassinated after twelve years of incompetence.

One last dynasty emerged in the aftermath of Commodus's death, that of the Severans who ruled from 192 - 235 CE. They faced growing threats on the Roman borders, as Germanic tribes staged repeated (and often at least temporarily successful) incursions to the north and a new Persian dynasty known as the Sassanids pressed against Roman territory to the east. The last Severan emperor, Severus Alexander, died in 235 CE, ushering in a terrible period of military defeat and instability considered in the next chapter.

The Empire

As noted above, by the year 117 CE under Trajan the Empire reached its greatest size. It encompassed most of England across to Germany and Romania, all of North Africa from present-day Morocco, and extended to the borders of the Parthian Empire. Beyond these borders were “barbarians” of various kinds; as far as the Romans were concerned there were no civilized people outside of their borders except the Persians. Trajan's successor, the emperor Hadrian, built an enormous series of fortifications to consolidate power on the frontiers - these were eventually (by the third century CE) known as the *limes*, permanent garrisons and fortresses that were meant to serve as barriers to prevent "barbarian" incursions. Some of these survive to the present, including Hadrian's Wall in northern England. While fleets patrolled the rivers and oceans, these garrisons controlled access to the empire.



The Empire at the height of its territorial expanse under Trajan in 117 CE.

As far as the Romans were concerned, there were only two things beyond those borders: to the north and northeast, endless tracts of inhospitable land and semi-human barbarians like the "Germans," and to the east, the only other civilization Rome was prepared to recognize: the Persians, ruled first by the Parthian clan and then the Sassanids. For the rest of the Roman Imperial period, Rome and Persia periodically engaged in both raiding and full-scale warfare, with neither side proving capable of conclusively defeating the other.

The closest Rome came to defeating the Persians was under Trajan when he managed to conquer Armenia and parts of Mesopotamia, but after his death Rome swiftly abandoned those territories. Even as they fought, however, Persia and Rome still traded, and Rome also adopted various Persian technologies and military tactics (for example, Rome adopted irrigation techniques from Persia, and Persia adopted engineering techniques from Rome). Persia had the best heavy cavalry in the world, and Rome learned to add heavy cavalry units to its legions by the fourth century CE.

Far beyond Persia was the Chinese Empire, already thousands of years old. China and Rome never established formal diplomatic ties, although the leaders of both empires knew of one another. During the entire period of Roman Imperial power, only China could produce silk,

which was highly coveted in Rome. Shipments of silk moved along the aptly-named Silk Road across Central Asia, directly linking the two most powerful empires in the world at the time.

In addition, a major navigational breakthrough occurred during the time of Augustus, when the Romans learned to navigate the Indian Ocean using the Monsoon winds to reach western India. There, they could trade for Chinese silk at much better prices. This journey was hugely risky, but if a Roman merchant could pull it off and return to Rome with a cargo hold full of silk, he would earn fully 100 times his investment as profit. Along with spices (especially pepper), the trade for silk eventually drained enormous amounts of gold from Rome, something that added up to a serious economic liability over the hundreds of years of exchange.

The most important, and threatening, border for Rome was to its north, on the eastern and northern banks of the Rhine and Danube rivers. The region the Romans called *Germania* was an enormous stretch of heavily forested land, which was cold, wet, and uninviting from the Roman perspective. The “Germans” were a hugely diverse group of tribes practicing feudal law, the system of law in which offenses were met with clan-based violent retribution or blood payments. For hundreds of years there were complex relationships between various tribes and the Roman empire in which the Romans both fought with and, increasingly, hired German tribes to serve as mercenaries. Eventually, some of the Germanic tribes were allowed to settle along the Roman borders in return for payments of tribute to Rome.

The two major rivers, the Rhine and the Danube, were the key dividing lines to the north of Rome, with Roman legions manning permanent fortifications there. As far as the Romans were concerned, even if they were able to militarily they did not *want* to conquer German territory. The Romans tended to regard the Germans as being semi-human at best, incapable of understanding true civilization. Some Romans did admire their bravery and codes of honor - the same Tacitus who provides much of the information on the early emperors contrasted the supposed weakness and dissolution of his contemporary Romans with the rough virtue of the Germans. That being noted, most Romans believed that the Celts, conquered by Caesar centuries earlier, were able to learn and assimilate to Roman culture, but the Germans, supposedly, were not. Likewise, *Germania* was assumed to be too cold, too wet, and too infertile to support organized farming and settlement. Thus, the role of the *limes* was to hold the Germans back rather than to stage new wars of conquest. For about three hundred years, they did just that, until the borders started breaking down by the third century CE.

The Army and Assimilation

Rome had established control over its vast territory thanks to the strength of the citizen-soldiers of the Republic. As described in the last chapter, however, the republican military system declined after the Punic Wars as the number of free, economically independent Roman citizens capable of serving in the army diminished. By the first century, most Roman soldiers became career soldiers loyal to a specific general who promised tangible rewards rather than volunteers who served only in a given campaign and then returned home to their farms.

Perhaps the most important thing Augustus did besides establishing the principate itself was to reorganize the Roman legions. He created a standing professional army with regular pay and retirement benefits, permanently ending the reliance on the volunteer citizen-soldiers that had fought for Rome under the republic. Instead, during the empire, legionaries served for twenty years and then were put on reserve for another five, although more than half died before reaching retirement age. The major benefits of service were a very large bonus paid on retirement (equivalent to 13 years of pay!) and land: military colonies spread across the empire ensured that a loyal soldier could expect to found a prosperous family line if he lived that long.

Service in the army was grueling and intense. Roman soldiers were expected to be able to march over 20 miles in a standard day's march carrying a heavy pack. They were subject to brutal discipline, up to and including summary execution if they were judged to have been derelict in their duties - one of the worst was falling asleep on guard duty, punishable by being beaten to death by one's fellow soldiers. Roman soldiers were held to the highest standards of unit cohesion, and their combat drills meant they were constantly ready for battle.

Starting in the Augustan period, the essential division in the Roman military was the *legion*, a self-sufficient army unto itself that could be combined with other legions to form a full-scale invasion force but could also operate on its own. During the Augustan period, each legion consisted of:

- The Legion: 5,400 infantry and specialists with 120 cavalry.
- Each legion was subdivided into 10 *cohorts* of 480 men each led by 6 *centurions*, veterans who led the cohorts in combat.
- Each cohort had six *centuries* of 80 men with each personally led by one of the centurions.
- Each century divided into 8 *squads* of 10 men, referred to as "tentmates" since they lived, worked, ate, and trained together.

- In addition, there were hundreds of specialists, from engineers to smiths and cooks. Each legion was thus self-sufficient as it traveled and could be expected to operate within hostile territory for long periods if necessary.

Each legion was led by a *legionary legate*, usually a powerful noble appointed by the imperial government or the emperor himself. These legates were often politicians rather than soldiers, meaning that the key figures in actual battle were the centurions, each of whom had earned his position through exemplary service. Perhaps most important of all was the lead centurion, the First Spear, who dictated tactics on the field.



Wall carvings of a Roman legion in battle, with the characteristic large rectangular shields. A regular legionnaire would typically fight in formation using a short sword after throwing javelins while closing with the enemy.

The legions were made up of Roman citizens, but not all members of the Roman military were citizens. Instead, as numerous as the legions were *auxiliaries*: Roman subjects (e.g. Celts, North Africans, Syrians, etc.) who nevertheless served the empire. The auxiliaries were divided into cohorts of infantry and *alae* ("wings") of cavalry. In comparison to the

infantry-focused Roman legions, the auxiliaries tended to vary their arms - auxiliaries could be slingers and archers as well as foot soldiers and cavalry. They tended to serve as scouts and support for the legions as well as engaging in combat in their own right. As of 23 CE they numbered about 150,000 men, which was the same as the legions at the time. The emperor Claudius rewarded 25 years of service with citizenship; by the early second century, all auxiliaries gained citizenship on discharge.

A key legion that stood apart from the rest of the military was the *Praetorian Guard*, whose major job was defending the emperor himself, followed in priority by the defense of Italy and the city of Rome. The Praetorian Guard started as nine cohorts of 480 men, but later each cohort was grown to 1,000 men. The terms of service in the Praetorian Guard were very attractive: 16 years instead of 25 and pay that was significantly higher (this was a necessity: emperors started with Claudius knew that they were vulnerable to the Praetorians and needed to keep them happy and loyal). Not surprisingly, Praetorians were recruited from veteran legionaries. They did not simply serve the emperor in the city of Rome, instead actively campaigning both when defending Roman territory from invasion (which became an increasing problem by the fourth century CE), and with the emperor while on campaign.

The army was important in integrating provincial subjects into Roman culture. A soldier recruited from the provinces had to learn Latin, at least well enough to take orders and respond to them. Auxiliaries served with men from all over the empire, not just their own home regions, and what each soldier had in common was service to Rome. Commanding officers were often from the Italian heartland, forming a direct link to the Roman center. Military families were a reality everywhere, with sons often becoming soldiers after their fathers. Thus, the experience of serving in the legions or the auxiliaries tended to promote a shared sense of Roman identity, even when soldiers were drawn from areas that had been conquered by Rome in the recent past.

In the provinces, there was a pattern that took place over a few generations. After being conquered by the Romans, there were often resistance movements and rebellions. Those were put down with overwhelming and brutal force, often worse than that of the initial invasion. Eventually, local elites were integrated in the governor's office and ambitious people made sure their sons learned Latin. Locals started joining the army and, if lucky, returned eventually with money and land to show for it. Roman amenities like aqueducts and baths were built and roads linked the province with the rest of the empire. In short, assimilation happened. A few generations after Roman conquest, many (local elites especially) in a given province would

identify with Roman civilization. Regular people in the countryside, meanwhile, would at least be obliged to tolerate Roman rule even if they did not embrace it.

Roman Society

Rome itself was opulent during this period. The city of Rome boasted eleven aqueducts, enormous structures that brought fresh water into the city from miles away. The houses of the rich had indoor plumbing with drains that led to public sewers. There were enormous libraries and temples, along with numerous public sites for recreation, including public baths, race tracks, and the famous Colosseum, used primarily for displays of lethal gladiatorial combat.

The empire as a whole enjoyed levels of commercial and agricultural productivity not seen again until the seventeenth century CE. Specialized craftsmen made high-quality goods to be sold on an empire-wide market, with better-off citizens enjoying access to quality tools, dishware, linens, and so on, much of which had been manufactured hundreds of miles away. While the long-term economic pattern was that the wealthier parts of society tended to become even richer at the expense of the common people, there was still a substantial “middle class” that enjoyed a relatively high standard of living.

We should note that, while the Romans are not famous as scientists, they are famous as architects and engineers. The Romans used concrete extensively in building projects. They mastered the art of building arches and domes to hold up ceilings without interior supports. Using only gravity, they could transport water dozens of miles, not just in Rome but in other major cities across the Empire. Roman roads were so well built that some survive to the present, now used by cars rather than the horse-drawn carts they were originally built for.

Each city built by the Romans in their conquered territory was laid out according to careful plans, with streets built in grids and centered on a public forum with public buildings. One of the reasons that the Romans were so effective in assimilating conquered peoples into Roman society was that they built a great deal of infrastructure; being conquered by Rome seemed less like a burden when an aqueduct, public bath, and street system appeared within a generation of the Roman conquest (the relative cultural and religious tolerance of Roman culture was also key). All of these cities were linked by the 40,000 miles of roads that stretched across the empire. The primary purpose of these administrative capitals was extracting taxes and other wealth from the local areas and funneling them back to Rome, but they also served as genuine cultural centers. Likewise, even though the roads were often built with troop movement in mind, people everywhere could take advantage of them for trade.

Social Classes

That all being said, there was vast social distances that separated elites and commoners. Even in the city of Rome, most of the citizens lived in squalor, packed into apartment buildings many stories high, made out of flammable wood, looming over open sewers. The rich lived in a state of luxury that probably would not be equaled until the Renaissance, but the majority of Romans lived in squalid conditions.

Most people in the empire were, of course, poor farmers; only a minority of the imperial population lived in cities. Peasants sometimes joined the army, but most were simply poor folk struggling to get by. They were seasonal laborers, they rented from wealthy landowners, or they owned farms but were perpetually threatened by the predatory rich. Over the centuries, poor farmers found it more and more difficult to hold on to their land, both because they could not compete with the enormous, slave-tilled plantations of the rich and because of outright extortion. There are numerous accounts of rich landowners simply forcing small farmers off of land and seizing it; the peasants could not afford to battle the rich in court and the rich had few scruples about hiring thugs to terrify the peasants into submission. Once in a great while, a poorer Roman citizen could petition an emperor personally for redress and succeed, as could the occasional provincial to a governor, but the immense majority of the time the poor (citizen and non-citizen alike) were simply at the mercy of elite landowners.

One percent of the population of the empire were members of the aristocracy, those men who were allowed to participate as officials in the imperial government and their families. In turn, access to political power was explicitly linked to wealth, a system first introduced by Augustus himself. To serve in the imperial senate required an annual income of 1,000,000 sesterces (the basic coin of the empire). To serve on the governing council of a small city or town required an annual income of 100,000 sesterces. Meanwhile, a typical soldier earned about 1,200 a year, and poor farmers much less. Land ownership was by far the major determinant of wealth, and with the prevalence of slavery, economies of scale dictated that the more land a given family controlled, the more wealth they could generate.

The overall pattern in the Roman Imperial period is that the wealthy were highly successful in becoming richer from generation to generation, at the expense of the rest of Roman society: the wealth of elite landowners grew approximately eight times from 1 CE to 400 CE, with almost no new wealth coming into the Roman economy during that period. Thus, as a whole, social mobility was so limited as to be almost nonexistent (to cite a single example, a member of the equestrian class in the Empire might have about 17,000 times the annual income

of a poor laborer). Roman elites kept taxes on their own property low, but the provinces were often ruthlessly exploited and overall tax levels were high. The immense majority of Roman citizens and subjects were born into the social class they would stay in for their entire lives regardless of their own intelligence and competence.

Still, while they might prey on poor farmers, elite Romans were well aware of the threat posed by destitute city-dwellers. Thus, one striking characteristic of the Imperial period was "bread and circus government." Building on a precedent originally established by the Gracchi during the Republic, the imperial state distributed free grain (and, later, wine and olive oil) to the citizens of the city of Rome. Eventually, other Roman cities adopted the practice as well. In addition, public games and theater performances were free, subsidized by the state or by elites showing off their wealth (the most popular were circuses: horse races around a track). Thus, a Roman citizen in one of the large cities could enjoy free bread and free entertainment. This policy was both a cynical move on the part of the state to keep down urban unrest and a legal right of urban citizens. Free bread or not, the average life expectancy was 45 years for men and 34 for women, the latter because of the horrible conditions of bearing children.

Meanwhile, fully 40% of the population of Italy were slaves when Augustus took power. Not only were slaves captured in war, but children born to slave mothers were automatically slaves as well. Some slaves did domestic labor, but most were part of the massive labor force on huge plantations and in mines. The conditions of life for slaves were usually atrocious, and strict oversight and use of violent discipline ensured that no slave revolt ever succeeded (despite the best efforts of leaders of revolts, like Spartacus in the first century BCE). Some slaves could earn their freedom, and the "freedmen" as a class tended to be innovative commercial entrepreneurs, but most slaves had little hope of freedom. Slavery declined by about 200 CE because supplies started drying up and prices rose; without the constant expansion of the empire, there were far fewer slaves available. By that time, however, the legal and social conditions of farmers had degenerated to the point that they were essentially serfs (known as *coloni*): unfree rural laborers, barely better than slaves themselves.

Law

For the republican period and the first few hundred years of the Empire, Roman jurisprudence was split in the provinces. Provincial people were accountable to their own legal systems so long as they were loyal to Rome and paid their taxes on schedule. The most famous historical example of the overlapping legal systems of the Empire was the biblical trial of Jesus before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Pilate tried to hand the case off to the local

Jewish puppet king, Herod, who in turn refused it and handed Jesus back over to Pilate. In the end, Jesus was executed by the Roman government for inciting rebellion, using the traditional Roman punishment of crucifixion.

Roman citizens could always appeal to Roman law if they wanted to, even if they were part of provinces far from Rome. This changed dramatically in 212 CE when the emperor Caracalla extended citizenship to all free men and women (to make it easier to collect taxes). This was an important event because it extended Roman law to almost everyone in the empire; citizens were also exempt from some of the crueler punishments including crucifixion.

Some of the concepts and practices of Roman law were to outlive the empire itself. Rome initiated the tradition of using precedent to shape legal decisions, as well as the idea that there is a spirit to laws that is sometimes more important than a literal interpretation. The Romans were the first to codify the idea that someone accused of a crime was innocent until proven guilty; this was a totally radical idea in the area of justice, which in the rest of the ancient world normally held the accused guilty unless guilt could be conclusively disproved.

Much of Roman law still seems grossly unfair from a contemporary perspective. In particular, laws came to establish a formal divide between the rich and the poor, even in the case of citizens. The rich were protected from torture and painful execution, while the poor were subject to both. Slaves were held in such a subservient position by the law that the testimony of a slave was only allowed in court cases if it *had* been obtained through torture. And, over everything else, the decrees of the emperor were the fundamental basis of law itself; they could not be appealed or contested in the name of some kind of imagined higher authority or written constitution. The emperor was not just about the law, he *was* the law.

Conclusion

For the first two centuries of its existence, Rome was overwhelmingly powerful, and its political institutions were strong enough to survive even prolonged periods of incompetent rule. Trouble was afoot on Rome's borders, however, as barbarian groups became more populous and better-organized, and as the meritocratic system of the "Five Good Emperors" gave way to infighting, assassination, and civil war. At the same time, what began as a cult born in the Roman territory of Palestine was making significant inroads, especially in the eastern half of the Empire: Christianity.

Image Citations (Wikimedia Commons):

[Augustus Caesar](#) - Till Niermann

[Colosseum](#) - Andreas Ribbefjord

[Empire 117 CE](#) - Eleassar

[Roman Legion](#) - Ursus