

6

The Roman World from 753 BCE to 500 CE

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6.1 CHRONOLOGY

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| 753 BCE | Founding of Rome |
| c. 753 – 510 BCE | Regal Period |
| c. 510 BCE – 44 BCE* | Roman Republic |
| 264 – 146 BCE | The Punic Wars |
| 133 BCE – 44 BCE | The Late Republic |
| 44 BCE – 476 CE | Roman Empire |
| 44 BCE – 68 CE | Julio-Claudian Dynasty |
| 69 CE | Year of the Four Emperors |
| 69 CE – 96 CE | Flavian Dynasty |
| 96 – 180 CE | The Five Good Emperors |
| 235 – 284 CE | The Third Century Crisis |
| 395 CE | Permanent division of the Empire into East and West |

* See, however, explanation about possible dates proposed by scholars for the fall of the Roman Republic

6.2 INTRODUCTION

In 458 BCE, facing a military attack from the two neighboring tribes of the Aequi and the Sabines, the Roman Senate took a drastic measure, reserved for the direst of circumstances: they appointed a dictator, who would single-handedly lead the state in this time of trouble. As the Roman historian Livy tells it, **Cincinnatus**, the senator who was appointed dictator, received the news while working on his farm. Abandoning the plow, he immediately rushed to join the army, which he then led to a swift and brilliant victory. Then something astonishing happened: Cincinnatus resigned his extraordinary powers and returned to his farm. For the remainder of the Roman Republic, and well into the Imperial Period, Cincinnatus continued to be seen as the quintessential Roman cultural hero and model of virtue: an aristocratic man who was

a talented soldier, general, and politician who put the interests of **Rome** first, above his own. While no other Roman politician displayed Cincinnatus' degree of self-sacrificing humility, the other Roman heroes of the Republic and the Empire were still uniformly male, predominantly aristocratic, and famed for military and political achievements.

But something happened to give rise to a rather different sort of cultural hero by the Late Roman Empire. In 203 CE, a young noblewoman and her slave were executed in Carthage, thrown into the arena with the

lions. Their crime? A stubborn faith: the belief that a Jewish man who lived in Judaea a century earlier was the son of God who had died on the cross and rose again. Eager to emulate his suffering in order to win eternal life with their God, the two women, **Perpetua and Felicity**, gave up a life of relative comfort and the chance to raise their babies—indeed, Felicity gave birth in prison mere hours before her execution!—placing their God above all else. They were not the only ones. Stories of martyrs abound in the Later Roman Empire and were told repeatedly by Christians, thus perpetuating the status of these martyrs as the new cultural heroes. But far from repelling others from imitating their example, these stories, rather, encouraged the rise of more willing martyrs to follow their suit. As a result of the spread of Christianity, therefore, the Roman cultural heroes of Late Antiquity were a far cry from Cincinnatus. Instead of aristocratic generals and politicians, they were nursing mothers and even slave-women who chose to die a humiliating and painful death for their faith and its promise of an eternal reward.

The story of the Roman world from the foundation of the city of Rome and to the fall of the Roman Empire in the West is, overall, a tale of two different transformations. The first of these is the dramatic transformation in cultural values and beliefs, a glimpse of which is reflected in the two stories above. The second is a similarly dramatic geographical transformation, which also brought about drastic clashes of cultures and a variety of changes throughout the entire Mediterranean world and beyond, that is, the transformation of a small village on the Tiber into one of the largest empires in all of world history, followed by a collapse of a part of that Empire, but a collapse from whose ashes arose what we now know as Europe.



Figure 6.1 | Cincinnatus leaves the plow to accept the dictatorship

Author: User "Antonius Proximo"

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6.3 QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOUR READING

1. In what ways did the geography and topography of Rome and the Roman Empire impact the history of the ancient Roman world?
2. What are the different periods of Roman history, and what are the chief defining characteristics of each period?
3. What primary sources are available for the study of Roman history, and what are the limitations of these sources?
4. What were the stages of Roman expansion?
5. What were the key civic conflicts and civil wars of the Roman Republic? What did each of these conflicts demonstrate about the changing nature of Roman politics?
6. When and why did the Roman Republic fall? What were some key differences between the Roman Republic and the Age of Augustus?
7. What are some of the primary sources about the early Christians? What was revolutionary about early Christianity, from the Roman perspective?
8. What were some of the problems with which areas in the periphery of the Roman Empire had to deal in the second century CE?
9. What were the problems that the Roman Empire faced during the third-century crisis, and how did Diocletian attempt to resolve these?
10. What changes did the Roman Empire experience in the fourth century CE, and what were the causes of these changes?
11. How did the Romans' view of Rome in Late Antiquity differ from their view of Rome in earlier periods?

6.4 KEY TERMS

- Aedile
- Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*
- *ara pacis*
- *auctoritas*
- Augustine, *City of God*
- Augustus
- Battle of Lake Regillus
- Bithynia
- Caligula
- Carthage
- Catilina
- Cato the Elder, *Origins*

- Censor
- Centuriate Assembly
- Christianity
- Cincinnatus
- Claudius
- Cleopatra
- Conflict of the Orders
- Constantine
- Constantinople
- Consul
- Council of Nicaea
- Crassus
- *cursus honorum*
- *dignitas*
- Diocletian
- Etruscans
- Eusebius
- Five Good Emperors
- Flavian dynasty
- Gaius Gracchus
- *Gravitas*
- Josephus, *Jewish War*
- Julian the Apostate
- Julio-Claudians
- Julius Caesar
- Juno
- Jupiter Optimus Maximus
- Lex Hortensia
- Licinian-Sextian law
- Livy
- Lucretia
- Macedonian Wars
- Magna Graecia
- manipular legion and legion of cohorts
- Marcus Antonius
- Marius
- Mars
- Minerva
- *mos maiorum*
- Nero
- New Testament
- Numa Pompilius
- *Optimates*
- Ostia
- *paterfamilias*
- Patricians
- Paul
- *pax deorum*
- *Pax Romana*
- Perpetua and Felicity
- Plebeian Council
- Plebeians
- Plebeian tribune
- Pliny the Younger
- Plutarch
- Polybius
- Pompeii
- Pompey
- *Populares*
- Praetor
- Proscriptions
- Punic Wars
- Pyrrhus
- Quaestor
- *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*

- Roman Empire (period)
- Roman Republic (period)
- Rome
- Romulus and Remus
- Romulus Augustulus
- Samnite Wars
- Senate
- Social War
- Suetonius
- Sulla
- Tacitus
- Tarquin the Proud
- Tetrarchy
- Theodosius
- Third-Century Crisis
- Tiber
- Tiberius (emperor)
- Tiberius Gracchus
- Trajan
- Triumvirate (First and Second)
- Twelve Tables
- Veii
- Venus
- Vergil, *Aeneid*
- Vespasian
- Year of the Four Emperors (69 CE)

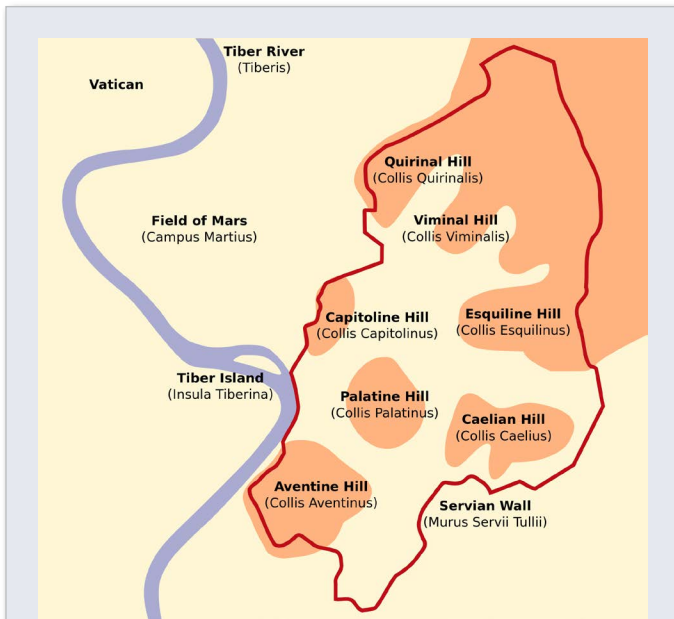
6.5 GEOGRAPHY AND TOPOGRAPHY OF ROME AND THE ROMAN EMPIRE

As the title of one recent textbook of Roman history puts it, Roman history is, in a nutshell, the story of Rome’s transformation “from village to empire.”¹ The geography and topography of Rome, Italy, and the Mediterranean world as a whole played a key role in the expansion of the empire but also placed challenges in the Romans’ path, challenges which further shaped their history.

Before it became the capital of a major empire, Rome was a village built on seven hills sprawling around the river **Tiber**. Set sixteen miles inland, the original settlement had distinct strategic advantages: it was immune to attacks from the sea, and the seven hills on which the city was built were easy to fortify. The Tiber, although marshy and prone to flooding, furthermore, provided the ability to trade with the neighboring city-states. By the mid-Republic, requiring access to the sea, the Romans built a harbor at **Ostia**, which grew to become a full-fledged commercial arm of Rome as a result. Wheeled vehicles were prohibited inside the city of Rome during the day, in order to protect the heavy pedestrian traffic. Thus at night, carts from Ostia poured into Rome, delivering food and other goods for sale from all over Italy and the Empire.

One of the most surprising aspects of the history of early Rome is that, despite constant threats from its more powerful neighbors, it was never swallowed by them. The **Etruscans** dominated much of northern Italy down to Rome, while the southern half of Italy was so heavily colonized by the Greeks as to earn the nickname “**Magna Graecia**,” meaning “Great Greece.” In addition, several smaller tribes hemmed the early Romans, mainly, the Latins, the Aequi, and the Sabines.

¹ Mary Boatwright, Daniel Gargola, Noel Lenski, and Richard Talbert. *The Romans: From Village to Empire: A History of Rome from Earliest Times to the End of the Western Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).



Map 6.1 | Map of the Seven Hills of Rome

Author: User "Renata3"
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Map 6.2 | Map of Italy in 400 BCE

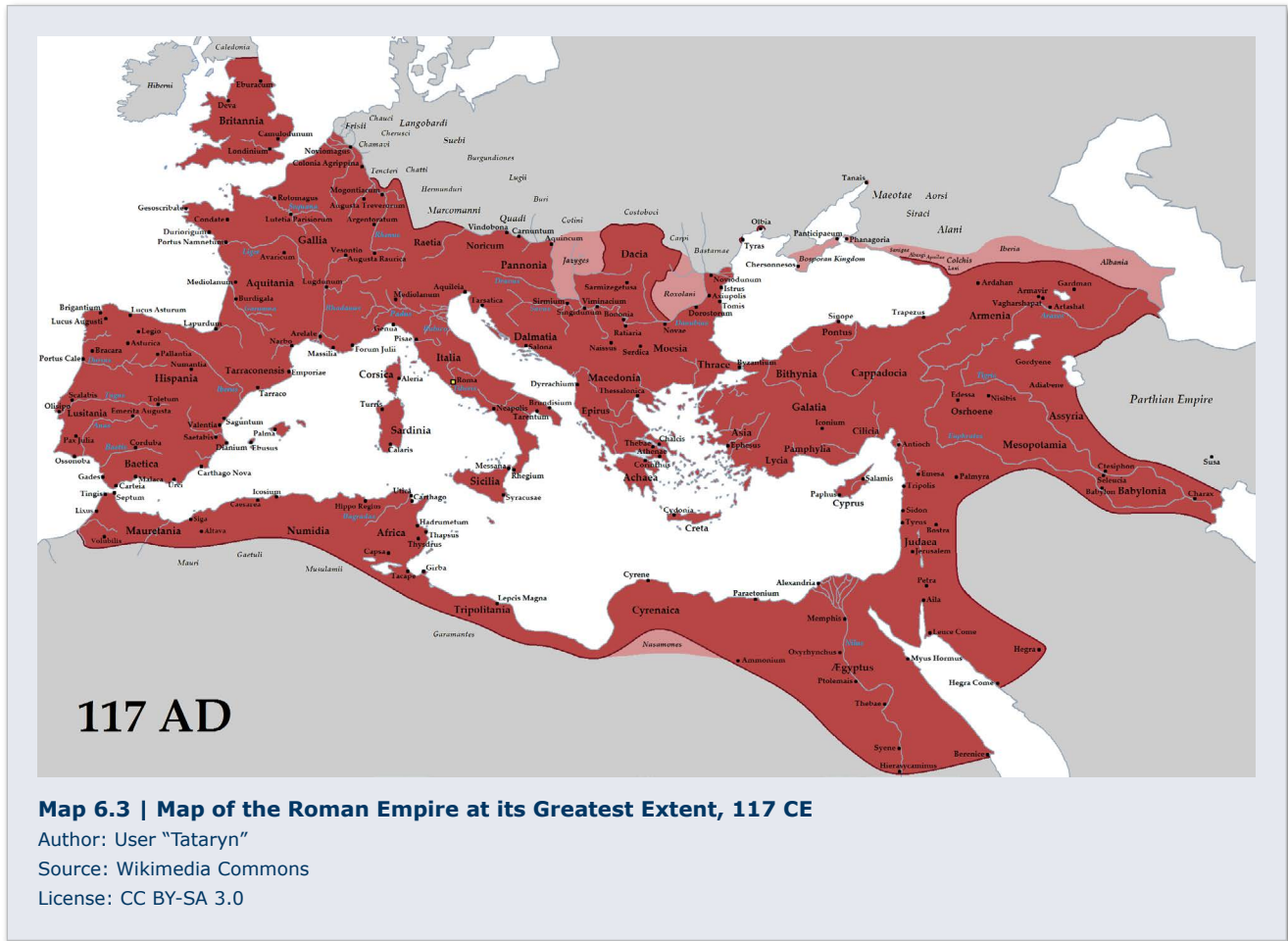
Author: User "Enok"
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The topography of Rome—the advantage of the hills and the river—likely was a boon in the city’s struggles against all of its neighbors. Likewise, the topography of Italy proper, with the Alps and the Appenines providing natural defenses in the north, hampered invasions from the outside. Indeed, the most famous example of an invasion from the north, that of Hannibal during the Second Punic War, is a case in point: he selected that challenging route through the Alps in order to surprise the Romans, and it proved even more destructive for his forces than he had anticipated.

As Rome built a Mediterranean empire, the city itself grew increasingly larger, reaching a population of one million by 100 CE. While Italy boasted fertile farmlands, feeding the city of Rome became a challenge that required the resources of the larger empire, and Egypt in particular became known as the breadbasket of Rome. As a result, emperors were especially cautious to control access to Egypt by prominent senators and other politicians, for fear of losing control over this key area of the Empire.

During the rule of the emperor Trajan in the early second century CE, the Roman Empire reached its greatest extent, stretching to Britain in the west, slightly beyond the Rhine and Danube river in the north, and including much of the Near East and north Africa.

Topography, however, played a role in the Romans’ ultimately unsuccessful struggle to hold on to these territories after Trajan’s death. The natural frontier offered by the Rhine and Danube rivers made it difficult for the Romans to maintain control over the territories on the other side of them. Struggling to fight off the warrior tribes in northern Britain, two second-century CE emperors—Hadrian, and later on Antoninus Pius—built



successive walls, which attempted to separate the un-Romanized tribes from the territory under Roman control. Finally, a persisting challenge for Roman emperors was that of the location of the empire's capital. When the Roman Empire consisted of Italy alone, the location of Rome in the middle of the Italian peninsula was the ideal location for the capital. Once, however, the empire became a Mediterranean empire that controlled areas far in all directions, the location of Rome was a great distance from all the problem frontiers. As a result, emperors over the course of the second and third centuries spent increasingly less time in Rome. Finally, Diocletian's split of the Empire in 293 CE into four administrative regions, each with a regional capital, left Rome out, and in 330 CE, the emperor Constantine permanently moved the capital of the empire to his new city of Constantinople, built at the site of the older Greek city of Byzantium.

The large area encompassed by the empire required a sophisticated infrastructure of roads and sea routes, and the Romans provided both. By the first century CE, these roads and routes connected the center of the empire (Rome) to the periphery, providing ways for armies, politicians, traders, tourists, and students to travel with greater security and speed than ever before. As primary sources reveal, travel was never a fully safe undertaking, as bandits lurked on roads and pirates on seas, greedy locals were always eager to fleece unsuspecting tourists, and shipwrecks were an unfortunately common reality. Still, the empire created an unprecedented degree

of networks and connections that allowed anyone in one part of the empire to be able to travel to any other part, provided he was wealthy enough to be able to afford the journey.

6.6 BASIC CHRONOLOGY AND PERIODS OF ROMAN HISTORY

According to Roman tradition, Rome was founded as a monarchy. That monarchy, however, was not long-lived, and its history is overshadowed by myth and legend. Historians of Rome have most often divided its history into two major periods, based on the type of government that Rome had at the time: the **Republic** (from the late sixth century BCE to the late first century BCE) and the **Empire** (from the late first century BCE to the fall of the Western half of the empire in the late fifth century CE). Indeed, as seen in the writings of the Roman historian Tacitus, already as early as the late first century CE, Romans themselves thought of their history in terms of those two periods. The basic difference between the two periods is quite simple. During the period of the Republic, Rome was ruled by a Republican government, which distributed power, in theory, among all Roman citizens. In practice, this was really an aristocratic oligarchy. By contrast, under the Empire, Rome was under one ruler, the Emperor.

Recent research, however, has challenged the over-simplification of Roman history that can be implied by thinking of it as comprising just two periods. The work of Harriet Flower has shown that the Roman Republic is best conceived of as a series of Republics, each with distinct features. The work of Peter Brown, furthermore, has challenged the myth of the “decline and fall” of the Roman Empire, first popularized by Edward Gibbon, a nineteenth-century British historian of Rome. Brown has shown that as a result of the Christianization of the Roman world, Roman culture in the Late Empire was quite different from that in the earlier periods, yet it was very much a flourishing culture.

This chapter proceeds chronologically, sub-dividing both the Republic and the Empire into early and late periods, while also devoting some attention to certain thematic topics that are key to understanding each period.

6.7 SOURCES AND PROBLEMS

One of the greatest challenges to modern historians of Rome is the Romans’ own seeming lack of interest in writing their own history for their first 600 years. While, according to Roman legend, Rome was founded in 753 BCE, the first Roman history in Latin, ***Origins***, composed by the Republican politician **Cato the Elder**, was not published until 149 BCE. A few senators had written about Roman history in Greek earlier on, and some aristocrats kept family histories, but Cato’s work was truly the first Roman history on a large scale, as it narrated events from the foundation of the city to Cato’s own death. Only fragments of Cato’s history survive; they reveal that Cato’s approach to the writing of history was rather unusual. Instead of referring to any individuals throughout Roman history by name, Cato referred to them by title or political position. As a result, his history was truly focused on Rome and aimed to glorify the accomplishments of Rome rather than individual Romans. Thankfully for modern historians, Cato’s experiment of nameless

history did not catch on with subsequent Roman historians. Modern historians are able to reconstruct the story of the Romans from a variety of written and archaeological sources, but some of these sources present problems of which the historian must be aware. Similarly to the challenges modern historians face when studying Greek history, historians of Rome must at times engage in educated guessing when attempting to reconstruct a picture of Rome and Romans based on the limited evidence that is available.

Because the genre of historical writing started so late in Rome, few histories survive from the period of the Republic. Of these, the most famous (and the most voluminous) is the work of **Livy**, who wrote his *Ab Urbe Condita* (From the Foundation of the City) in the late first century BCE. Livy was very much an “armchair historian,” but he appears to have had access to a number of sources that are now lost, such as family histories from a number of aristocratic families. As the title indicates, Livy began his work with the legends about the founding of Rome. He continued his narrative down to his time, the age of Augustus, and the last known events in his work covered the year 9 BCE. Although Livy’s work consisted of 142 books, only about a quarter survives, including the first ten books, covering the regal period and the early republic and the narrative of the first two Punic Wars. Other prominent historians of the Republic whose works survive include Sallust, a contemporary of Caesar who turned to writing moralistic history after a frustrating political career, and Caesar himself, who wrote two books about his own campaigns: the *Gallic Wars*, about his conquest of Gaul in the 50’s BCE, and the *Civil War*, about his civil war against Pompey in 49 – 45 BCE.

The works of two prominent historians survive from the period of the Roman Empire. **Tacitus**, another politician-turned-historian, wrote in the early second century CE two works about the history of the Roman Empire in its first century of existence. The *Annals* covered the rule of the emperors Tiberius through Nero, while the *Histories* continued the narrative to the rule of the emperor Domitian. Significant portions of both works survive. Ammianus Marcellinus, a military officer writing in the late fourth century CE, saw himself as a successor of Tacitus, and composed a massive history of the Roman Empire from the end of Tacitus’ work to his own day. In addition, the sensationalizing biographer **Suetonius**, a contemporary of Tacitus, composed tabloid-style biographies of the first twelve emperors (from Caesar to Domitian). The anonymous *Historia Augusta*, composed sometime in the late Empire, provides similarly sensationalizing biographies of Roman emperors and some usurpers from Hadrian in the early second century CE to Carinus in the late third century CE.

In addition to these Roman historians and biographers, a number of historical works in Greek survive from the late Republic and the Empire that cover topics related to Roman history. To mention just a few examples, in the late first century BCE, Diodorus of Sicily wrote a massive universal history that includes key events of Roman history, alongside Greek history and mythology. The Greek biographer **Plutarch**, writing in the first century CE, paired for the sake of comparison biographies of famous Greeks and Romans; one exemplary such pairing is that of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. **Josephus**, a Jewish rebel leader turned Roman citizen, wrote the *Jewish War*, a detailed account of the disastrous Jewish revolt against Rome in the 60’s CE.

Works of history, however, are only one type of source that modern historians of Rome use. Other written sources include poems, novels, letters of politicians and other prominent

figures, military and farming manuals, cookbooks, etc. For instance, one of the best sources for the political ideology of the Augustan age is **Vergil's** epic poem *Aeneid*, which tells the story of the Trojan hero Aeneas and his struggle to reach Italy after the fall of Troy to found Rome. Arguably the single best source for everyday life in the Roman provinces under the Empire is **Apuleius'** novel *Metamorphoses*, better known under the title *Golden Ass*. The novel is a fictional account of a man accidentally turned into a donkey, who tells the narrative of his travels through the Roman Empire in the late second century CE. And one of the best sources for the government of Roman provinces is the correspondence of Pliny the Younger, governor of the province of Bithynia on the shores of the Black Sea in 111 – 113 CE, with the emperor Trajan. To say the least, the job of the provincial governor, based on these letters, appears to have been decidedly unglamorous.

Early Christianity is one area of Roman history that has been especially well documented from its inception. The New Testament is an invaluable source, as it presents sources by early Christians about their own faith and its spread throughout the Roman Empire. A variety of popular heretical texts from the second and third centuries also survives and allows historians to reconstruct some of the dissenting views held in the early church. Writings in Greek and Latin by a number of influential figures in the early church, dubbed the Church Fathers, document the theological debates that resulted ultimately in the Nicene Creed. Starting in the second century CE, martyrdom accounts and saints' lives provide admittedly semi-fictional and stylized biographies of individual believers. Finally, two prominent theologians in the Late Empire attempted to write (or re-write) Roman history specifically through a Christian lens. **Eusebius**, the Bishop of Caesarea in the fourth century CE, wrote the *History of the Church*, focusing on the history of Christianity from its beginnings to his day. Then in the early fifth century CE, **Augustine**, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, wrote the *City of God*, a massive work covering history and legends of Rome from its beginnings to his day, in an attempt to show that Rome's previous successes were due not to adherence to the pagan gods, but instead always to the Christian God's mercy.

In addition to written sources of various kinds, archaeological sources provide further insight into Roman life in different periods. Examples of sources that survive include inscriptions, especially gravestones; traded goods, such as lamps or bricks, which allow historians to reconstruct the movement of goods across the empire; and a number of Roman towns and military camps.

One example of the random nature of how some sources were able to survive is the ancient site of **Pompeii**. The eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE caused volcanic ash to rain down on the resort Roman town of Pompeii and the nearby town of Herculaneum, effectively burying both towns and preserving them completely for



Figure 6.2 | Reconstructed Roman Tombstone |

Reconstructed Copy of a Tombstone for a Roman Soldier Stationed in Britain in the first century CE

Author: User "Chestertouristcom"
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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Figure 6.3 | Ruins of Pompeii | Ruins of Pompeii from above, with Vesuvius in the background

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modern archaeologists. The tragedy for the Roman residents of the two towns at the time proved to be a modern archaeologist's dream.

While, as the above summary shows, abundant sources of different types survive from different periods of Roman history, certain perspectives are difficult to reconstruct from our sources. For instance, slaves in the Roman world were as archaeologically invisible as in the Greek world. Likewise, very little evidence documents women's lives before the rise of Christianity, and their voices are largely left out from Roman history. Other than epitaphs on their gravestones, most average Romans, in general, left no record of their lives, so our evidence is dominated by the history of the aristocracy. Still, the careful historian can gain at least some insight into these lesser-documented perspectives by gathering all references to them in sources that survive.

6.8 EARLY AND MIDDLE REPUBLIC

The period from the founding of Rome to the end of the Punic Wars is less documented than subsequent Roman history. Nevertheless, this period was the formative time during which Rome grew from a village on the Tiber to a pan-Mediterranean empire.

The process was as fascinating to consider for later Romans as for outsiders. The Greek politician-turned-historian **Polybius**, who spent seventeen years as a hostage in Rome and became quite a fan of the Roman military and political machine, put it simply in the prologue to his *Histories*, in which he documented the meteoric conquest of the Mediterranean world by the Romans:

For who is so worthless or lazy as not to wish to know by what means and under what system of government the Romans in less than fifty-three years have succeeded in subjugating nearly the entire known world to their rule, an achievement unprecedented in history? (Polybius 1.1.5)

Polybius' question pointed to the answer that he subsequently proposed: part of the reason for the Romans' success was their adoption of the Republican government as replacement for their original monarchy. Polybius became increasingly convinced during his stay in Rome that the Romans' government was superior to all others in the Mediterranean at the time.

6.8.1 From Monarchy to Republic: Some Myths and Legends

“In the beginning, kings held Rome.” Thus the late first-century CE Roman historian Tacitus opened his *Annals*, a history of the Empire under the rule of the emperors from Tiberius to Nero. Early Roman history is shrouded in myth and legend, but the beliefs of later Romans about their own past are important to consider, as these beliefs, whether truly grounded in reality or not, determined subsequent decisions and actions of the historical Romans later on. This tendency is especially true of the Romans' myths about the foundation of their city in 753 BCE and the kings who ruled it until the establishment of the Republic in 510 BCE.

According to myth, Rome received its name from its founder **Romulus**, the son of the war god Mars, and a descendant of the Trojan hero Aeneas. By linking themselves to the Trojans,



the Romans were able to boast an ancient, reputable lineage, rivaling that of the Greeks, and a prominent place in the Greek heroic epic, Homer's *Iliad*. Furthermore, when embarking on a conquest of Greece later on, the Romans could claim to be seeking revenge for their Trojan ancestors' defeat and destruction by the Greeks during the Trojan War. Several generations removed from their heroic ancestor Aeneas, Romulus and his twin brother **Remus** were famously abandoned as infants and then nursed by a she-wolf, the sacred animal of their father Mars.

The sweetness of the story ends there, however. While Romulus was building Rome, Remus insulted the new city, and his brother killed him to avenge its honor. Later, after Romulus had completed the building of the new city with his band of soldiers, he realized the lack of women in the city, so Romulus and his supporters raided the neighboring tribe, the Sabines, and kidnapped their women.

It is telling that later Romans believed that their city was founded on fraternal bloodshed, as well as on rape and kidnapping. The stories of Romulus' accomplishments, while not laudatory, show an important Roman belief: the greatness of Rome sometimes required morally reprehensible actions. In other words, Rome came first, and if the good of the city required the sacrifice of one's brother, or required force against others, then the gods were still on the side of the Romans and ordained these actions.

Romans believed that, altogether, their city was ruled by seven different kings in succession. After Romulus, king **Numa Pompilius** regulated Roman religion and created many of the priestly colleges and positions that continued to exist thereafter. The seventh and final king, however, **Tarquin the Proud**, was known for his and his family's brutality. The final straw appears to have been the rape of a nobleman's wife, **Lucretia**, by the king's son. An aristocratic revolution ensued, which appears to have been largely bloodless, if Livy's account is to be trusted. The royal family was expelled from the city, and two consuls were immediately elected to govern the newly formed Republic. Or so, again, Livy tells us, based on Roman legend. The reality is likely to have been more complicated. Assuming there truly were seven kings who ruled the city, and assuming that the last of them was driven out by an aristocratic revolution, it appears that a period of transition ensued, as the Romans experimented with a variety of short-term solutions before arriving at the model of the Republican government that we



Figure 6.4 | She-Wolf Suckles Romulus and Remus | You can see a replica of this statue in Rome, Georgia.

Author: User "Nyenec"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

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know in the historical period. Furthermore, apparently what guided that gradual evolution of the government was the growing dissatisfaction of the plebeians, the lower socio-economic majority of the city, with their exclusion from the political process.

6.8.2 Early Republic: Conflict of Orders, the Twelve Tables, and Key Legislations

Roman sources from all periods, beginning already in the early Republic, reveal certain common values that all Romans held dear and considered to be foundational for their state. First, Romans had a strong respect for the past and were averse to change. Indeed, reformers had a difficult time passing their proposals in all periods of Roman history. The term for this reverence for the past, *mos maiorum*, “custom of ancestors” or “custom of elders,” is telling. While innovation is a revered value in the modern world, Romans believed that innovation amounted to disrespect for their ancestors. Ancestral custom, which had first made Rome great, had to be respected, and successful reformers, such as the emperor Augustus, managed to phrase their reforms as a return to something old, rather than as something new. Three additional values that are key to understanding the Romans are *auctoritas*, “power” or “authority;” *dignitas*, roughly meaning “dignity;” and *gravitas*, “seriousness.” Each citizen in the state had a degree of *auctoritas*, that intangible quality that made others obey him, but the degree of *auctoritas* varied, depending on one’s social and political standing. Augustus, Rome’s first emperor, would later describe his

position in the state as having more *auctoritas* than anyone else. The other two qualities, *dignitas* and *gravitas*, were connected and reflected one’s bearing and behavior as a true Roman. Jocularly was not valued, but seriousness reflected a particularly Roman conduct and determination. It is striking that Romans never smiled in portraits. The austere facial expression, instead, conveyed their power and superiority to others, whom they had conquered.

While sharing common values, Romans were also deeply aware of social divisions between themselves. From its earliest time, Roman citizen population was divided into two orders: the **patricians**, defined as the descendants from the first one hundred senators appointed to the Roman aristocratic Senate by king Romulus, and the **plebeians**, that is, everyone who was not a patrician. The plebeians had their own political assembly, the **Plebeian Council**, while all Roman citizens also belonged to the **Centuriate Assembly**, which was responsible for annual elections for top political offices. The period of the early Republic, following the expulsion of the kings, was a time of conflict for the two orders, as patricians tried to establish a government

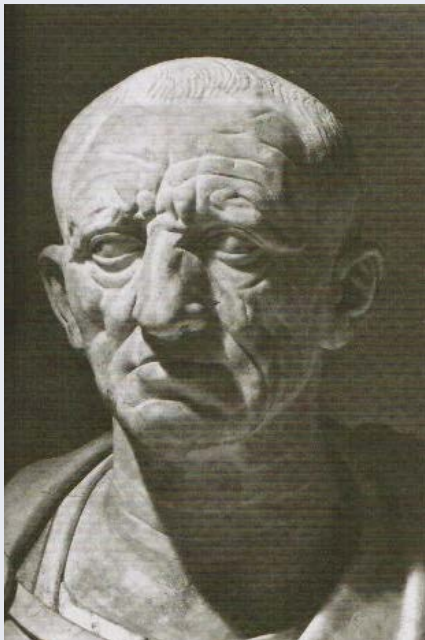


Figure 6.5 | Bust of an austere Roman, possibly Cato the Elder

Author: User "Shakko"
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that reserved all political power to themselves, whereas the plebeians fought for the opportunity to hold political and religious offices. Although they did not wield any political power at first, they discovered in the early fifth century that their most powerful weapon was secession, that is, departure en masse from the city, until the patricians acquiesced to a demand. While much about the **Conflict of the Orders**—just as anything else about the history of the early Republic—is shrouded in legend, it is possible to track its progress through the evidence of legislations that the Romans passed.

In 494 BCE, following the first plebeian secession, the Roman Senate allowed the plebeians to elect plebeian tribunes. An office that eventually was reserved for senators, it was originally merely an opportunity for plebeians to elect officers in the Plebeian Council, the assembly of all plebeian citizens, who would advocate for them. Plebeians next appear to have advocated for a public display of the laws, in order to protect the poor during lawsuits. The result was the first Roman legal code, the **Twelve Tables**, which was inscribed on twelve tables c. 450 BCE and displayed in public. One of the laws included was a ban on intermarriage between plebeians and patricians, showing a clear commitment on the part of the patricians to maintain the separation of the orders. It is important to note, however, that with the gradual decline in the number of patrician families over the course of the Roman Republic, most began to intermarry with prominent plebeian families.

The highest political office in the Republic, that of the consul, continued to be reserved solely for patricians until 367 BCE, when two senators sponsored the **Licinian-Sextian law**. The law required that one of the two consuls elected each year had to be plebeian. The phrasing of the law was significant, as it allowed the possibility that both consuls elected in a particular year could be plebeian, although this event did not happen in reality until 215 BCE. Finally, the legislation that modern historians have considered to have ended the early Republican Conflict of the Orders is the **Lex Hortensia** of 287 BCE. This law made all legislations passed by the Plebeian Council binding on all Romans, patricians and plebeians alike.

As historians connect the dots in the story of the Conflict of the Orders through these legislations, one trend that emerges is the gradual weakening of the patricians along with the growing influence of the plebeians on Roman government. Indeed, by the third century, a number of plebeian families were as wealthy and successful as patrician families, whereas some old patrician families had fallen on hard times.

6.8.3 **Cursus Honorum and Roman Religion**

The debate over plebeian access to political offices in general, and to the consulship in particular, resulted in the creation of a rigid ***cursus honorum***, a sequence or ladder of political offices. The ultimate dream of every Roman who entered politics was to become a consul, but the narrowing pyramid that was the *cursus honorum* stood in his path. All offices were held for the term of one year, and, in order to prevent any one individual from amassing too much power, candidates had to wait ten years between consulships. Finally, each office had a minimum age requirement, with a special privilege for patricians to subtract two years from that minimum.

The prerequisite for holding any political office was ten years of military service. Thus, aspiring Roman politicians normally entered the army around eighteen years of age. Following ten years of distinguished service, candidates who were at least thirty years of age were allowed to run for the first office in the *cursus*: the quaestorship. The number of **quaestors** each year rose over time to twenty by the late Republic. Each quaestor was assigned to a particular duty for his year in office, varying from supervising the coin mint in Rome to serving as an assistant to a provincial governor or a consul in charge of a war.

While not officially part of the required *cursus honorum*, most ex-quaestors next ran for the office of the **plebeian tribune**, if they were plebeian, or an aedile. Ten plebeian tribunes were elected each year and were supposed to advocate for the benefit of the plebeians during Senatorial debates. Aediles—a term derived from the Latin “aedes,” meaning “building” or “temple”—were in charge of public building projects and often also sponsored public entertainment.

The next step in the *cursus* was the praetorship. Similarly to the quaestors, the number of **praetors** rose over time, until topping at eight in the late Republic. Praetors could hold *imperium*, the right to command an army; thus, they often served in military roles or in administrative capacity by governing a province. Finally, one praetor each year, the *praetor urbanus*, was in charge of administering justice in the city of Rome and keeping track of legal cases and important decisions, which he issued at the end of the year as the Praetor’s Edict.

Upon reaching the age of forty, candidates who had successfully held the praetorship ultimately could run for the consulship. Two **consuls** were elected annually, and this position change to “office” was the pinnacle of the Roman political career. Aristocratic families kept for centuries on display in their homes the ancestor masks of members of the family who had been consuls. Since ten years were required to elapse between successive consulships, very few individuals ever held more than one consulship, until several politicians in the late Republic broke the rules altogether. Last but not least, one additional office existed, for which ex-consuls could run: every five years, two **censors** were elected for a period of eighteen months for the purpose of conducting the census of citizens. While this structure of annually-elected offices was designed to prevent any one individual from usurping all political power in the state, the Senate also realized that, on rare occasions, concentrating all power in one set of hands was needed. Thus the Senate could appoint a dictator for a non-renewable period of six months in times of serious military emergency, such as in the already-mentioned case of Cincinnatus.

The *cursus honorum* is best visualized as a pyramid with a wide base and narrowing each step on the way up. While twenty men each year were elected to the quaestorship, only a fraction of them could ever achieve the praetorship, and a yet smaller fraction could rise to the consulship. Still, election to the quaestorship secured life-long membership in the Senate, the governing body of roughly 300 politicians—doubled in the first century BCE to 600—who effectively governed Rome under the Republic. The question remains, nevertheless: how did some men achieve political advancement while others never made it past the quaestorship? Part of the key to success, it appears, lay outside of politics proper, belonging instead to the realm of religion.

Roman religion, similarly to Greek, was traditionally polytheistic, with many myths and gods aligned to the Greek counterparts. Zeus, Greek king of the gods, became Jupiter, and was a patron



Figure 6.6 | The Capitoline Triad | Jupiter Optimus Maximus, with Juno and Minerva (known together as the Capitoline Triad). Note Juno's sacred goose at her foot, and Minerva's sacred owl next to her.

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god of Rome under the title **Jupiter Optimus Maximus**, or Jupiter the Best and the Greatest.

His consort, Hera, became the Roman goddess **Juno** and was the patron goddess of marriage. The Greek Athena became Roman **Minerva** and was the patron divinity of women's crafts. In addition, both **Venus**, the goddess of love, and **Mars**, the god of war, had mythical family connections to Rome's human founders. Countless other divinities abounded as well; even the Roman sewer system, Cloaca Maxima, had its own patron goddess, Cloacina.

While Romans were expected to worship some of the gods in private, often making vows to them

and promising gifts if the gods fulfilled a request, Roman religion also had a significant public component that was reserved for the priestly colleges. Although not limited to politicians, membership in these colleges was at times key for political advancement. One example of this phenomenon in action is the career of Julius Caesar, whose political career took off after his appointment to the religious office of **pontifex maximus**, head of Roman religion. Ultimately, both public and private religion aimed at the same goal: keeping the **pax deorum**, peace with the gods, upon which the success of their state rested, as the Romans believed. Put simply, as long as Romans maintained a respectful peace with their gods, they ensured Rome's success. Whenever any disasters befell the state, however, Romans typically assumed that **pax deorum** had been violated in some way. The gods then had to be appeased in order to end the disaster and prevent similar events from occurring in the future.

6.8.4 Roman Expansion to the End of the Punic Wars

While the legends about the kings of Rome suggest that they had significant military responsibilities, it appears that their military actions were largely defensive. Just a decade or so after the expulsion of the kings, shortly after 500 BCE, however, Roman expansion began in earnest. It is important to note here several key features of the early Roman military. First, until the late Republic, Rome did not maintain a standing army. Rather, a new army was raised for each campaign, and campaigns were typically launched in the spring and ended in the fall. The festival of the October Horse, one of the religious festivals the Romans celebrated each year, involved a ritual purification of the cavalry and originally was likely designed as the end point of the campaign

season. Also, similarly to the Greek world, the Romans had minimum wealth requirements for military service, since soldiers supplied their own equipment. Finally, one significant trend to note in early Republican military history is the repeated nature of Roman conflicts with the same enemies, such as the three **Samnite Wars**, the three **Punic Wars**, and the four **Macedonian Wars**. This repetition suggests that, for whatever reason, the Romans did not aim to annihilate their opponents, unless absolutely pressed to do so.

It appears that the Roman expansion in the 490s BCE began as a defensive measure. In either 499 BCE or 496 BCE, the expelled seventh king of Rome, Tarquin the Proud, joined forces with the Latin League, a group of about thirty city-states around the area of Rome, and led them to attack the Romans. The result was the **Battle of Lake Regillus**, a decisive victory for Rome. The Romans signed an uneasy peace treaty with the Latins, but war broke out again in 340 – 338 BCE. The Roman victory this time resulted in the absorption of the Latin city-states into Rome as partial citizens.

The Latins were not the only enemies the nascent Roman Republic had to face. Romans fought and gradually conquered the Etruscan city-states to the north. One especially significant victory was over the powerful Etruscan city of **Veii** in 396 BCE. A legend preserved by Livy states that Romans were only able to conquer Veii after they performed the ceremony of *evocation*, “calling out.” Fearing that their siege of Veii was not going well because Juno, the patron goddess of Veii, was not on their side, the Romans called Juno out of Veii; they promised her a nice new temple in Rome if she would switch sides. Shortly thereafter, the city fell to the Romans. When the Roman soldiers were packing up the cult statue of Juno from her temple in Veii for transportation to Rome, a cheeky Roman soldier asked Juno if she wanted to come to Rome. The statue enthusiastically nodded her head. Livy’s history is full of similar tales of divine providence intervening on the side of the Romans. These legends show the Romans’ own belief that throughout the process of expansion, the gods had protected them and guided them to success.

While still fighting the Latins, the Romans embarked upon what turned out to be a series of three wars with their neighbors to the east, the Samnites. Each of these wars, the last of which ended in 290 BCE, resulted in Roman territorial gains; by the end of the Third Samnite War, Rome controlled all of central Italy. It also appears that, at some point during the Samnite Wars, the Romans switched from fighting in the Greek hoplite phalanx fashion to a system of their own making, the **manipular legion**. This new system apparently allowed more flexibility in the arrangement of the troops on the battlefield; it also allowed using both heavy and light infantry as needed, instead of keeping them in a static formation for the duration of a battle.



Figure 6.7 | Two Roman Infantrymen and a Cavalryman, second century BCE

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While not much else is known about the manipular legion, it appears to have been an effective system for the Romans for much of the Republican period.

It is striking to consider that the Romans spent eighty of the hundred years in the third century BCE at war. They did not seem to have had the ambition to conquer the Greek city-states who were their neighbors in southern Italy; in 280 – 275 BCE, Rome nevertheless became embroiled in a war with **Pyrrhus**, king of Epirus in northern Greece, after providing help to Thurii in its dispute with Tarentum. Tarentum requested Pyrrhus' help, and he proceeded to invade Italy. The Romans fought three major battles against Pyrrhus, the first two of which he won at great cost to his army. Indeed, the term “Pyrrhic victory” in modern English refers to a

victory that is so costly as to be truly a loss. The Romans finally defeated Pyrrhus at their third battle against him in 275 BCE, showing the superiority of the new Roman manipular legion even against the phalanx of the Macedonians, military descendants of Alexander the Great himself. This victory united most of Italy, except for the very northern portion, under Roman rule.

The war with Pyrrhus was the Romans' first serious conflict with the Greek world, but it was far from their last. The Romans' proximity to northern Greece, in particular, ensured an intersection of spheres of interest, thus also providing cause for continued conflict. Between 214 and 148 BCE, Rome fought four separate Macedonian Wars. During roughly the same period, from 264 and 146 BCE, the Romans also fought three Punic Wars against **Carthage**, originally a Phoenician colony that became a leading maritime power. Culminating with the Roman destruction of both Carthage

Map 6.5 | Roman Territories at the End of the Second Punic War |

Interactive Map Showing Stages of Roman Expansion in the Republic and Empire

Legend:

- Roman Republic: 510 BC - 40 BC
- Roman Empire: 20 CE - 360 CE
- Eastern Roman Empire: 405 CE - 1453 CE
- Western Roman Empire: 405 CE - 480 CE

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NOTE: Interactive map requires Adobe Flash. Click the following link to view graphic on original website. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Roman_Republic_Empire_map.gif

and Corinth in 146 BCE, the eventual victory of the Romans over both powers allowed the Romans to gain full control over them and their previous land holdings. Their victory effectively put the entire Mediterranean world under Roman rule.

In 146 BCE, when the Romans found themselves in control of a Mediterranean empire, they appeared to foresee little of the consequences of such a rapid expansion on internal stability in Rome proper. A critical question nevertheless faced them: how would the Republic, whose system of government was designed for a small city-state, adapt to ruling a large empire? The preliminary answer on which the Romans settled was to divide the conquered territories into provinces, to which senatorial governors were assigned for terms that varied from one to five years. The system continued, with minor variations, into the Empire.



Map 6.6 | Roman Provinces in the Late First Century BCE and Early First Century CE

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The new availability of governor positions, however, only made the political competition in the Republic even stiffer than before. Senators competed for the most desirable positions; typically, these were provinces in which military action was on-going—since this provided the potential

for winning military glory—or provinces that were wealthy, with the potential opportunity in governing them to acquire wealth.

6.9 FALL OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC

The victory over Carthage in the Second Punic War allowed Rome to “close” the circle of the Mediterranean almost completely, acquiring control over all territories that had previously belonged to Carthage. The destruction of Carthage in the Third Punic War, while largely a symbolic gesture, further cemented Rome’s control over the entire Mediterranean. The late Republican historian Sallust, though, grimly saw the Roman victory in the Punic Wars as the beginning of the end of the Republic. As Sallust and some other conservative politicians of his day believed, this victory corrupted the noble Roman character, traditionally steeled by privation. More importantly, the abundance of resources that flowed in following the victories over Carthage raised the question of distribution of this new wealth and land. The disagreements over this question dominated the politics of the Late Republic, creating two new political factions: the *Populares*, or those who protected the interests of the people, and the *Optimates*, or those who protected the interests of the best element of the populace—namely, themselves.

6.9.1 The Gracchi and the Beginning of Political Violence

It is striking to consider that political violence was minimal in the Roman Republic until 133 BCE. Indeed, if the legends are true, even the expulsion of the kings in 510 BCE was a bloodless event. Starting with 133 BCE, however, the final century of the Roman Republic was defined by political violence and civil wars.

In 133 BCE, **Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus**, a scion on his mother’s side of one of the oldest and most respected families in Rome, the Corneli Scipiones, was one of the ten annually elected plebeian tribunes. Alarmed that the lands acquired through recent Roman conquests had largely been taken over by rich landowners at the expense of poorer Romans, Gracchus proposed a land distribution law, known as the *Lex Sempronia Agraria*. Gracchus argued that the advantages of such land redistribution would have benefited the state, since land-ownership was a pre-requisite for military service. Aware that the Senate’s Optimates faction opposed his proposal, Gracchus took his law directly to the Plebeian Council, which passed it. This measure resulted in escalating conflict between Gracchus and the rest of the Senate. At a meeting of the Senate, the *pontifex maximus*, who was Tiberius Gracchus’ own cousin Publius Cornelius Scipio Nasica, ultimately argued that Gracchus had attempted to make himself king; thus, he had to be stopped. Since weapons were banned inside the Senate building, enraged Senators grabbed whatever was on hand, including chair and table legs, and clubbed Gracchus to death. As the biographer Plutarch states, this was the first instance of civic strife of this kind in ancient Rome.

The death of Tiberius Gracchus also meant the death of his proposed law. Ten years later, however, Gracchus’ proposed reforms gained a second life in the hands of his younger brother, **Gaius Gracchus**, who was elected plebeian tribune in 123 BCE and served a second term in that

office in 122 BCE. Gaius Gracchus' revived agrarian reform proposal was even more ambitious than his brother's a decade earlier. Especially controversial was Gaius Gracchus' proposal of granting full Roman citizenship to Rome's Italian allies. Finally, in 121 BCE, alarmed at Gaius Gracchus' popularity with the people, the consul Lucius Opimius proposed a new measure in the Senate: a *senatus consultum ultimum*, or the final decree of the Senate, which amounted to allowing the consuls to do whatever was necessary to safeguard the state. Realizing that the passing of this law amounted to his death sentence, Gaius Gracchus committed suicide.

The proposed reforms of Gaius Gracchus were overturned after his death, but the legacy of the Gracchi for the remainder of the history of the Roman Republic cannot be underestimated. First, their proposed laws showed the growing conflict between the rich and the poor in the Roman state. Second, the willingness on the part of prominent Senators to resort to violence to resolve matters set a dangerous precedent for the remainder of the Republic and fundamentally changed the nature of Roman politics. Finally, the support that the Gracchi received from the Roman people, as well as the residents of Italian cities who were not full citizens, showed that the causes that the Gracchi adopted were not going to go away permanently after their death. Indeed, Rome's Italian allies went to war against Rome in 90 – 88 BCE; the result of this **Social War**, after “socii,” meaning “allies,” was the grant of full Roman citizenship rights to Italians.

6.9.2 The Civil War of Marius and Sulla, and the Conspiracy of Catilina

The affair of the Gracchi was the first clear instance in the late Republic of *Populares* and *Optimates* in a violent conflict. Forty years later, a conflict between two politicians, representing different sides in this debate, resulted in a full-fledged civil war.

In 107 BCE, impatient over the prolonged and challenging war against the Numidian king Jugurtha, the Romans elected as consul Gaius **Marius**.

While Marius had already enjoyed a distinguished military career, he was a *novus homo*, or “new man,” a term the Romans used to refer to newcomers to Roman politics, meaning individuals who have not had any family members elected to political office. Even more shockingly, Marius was not even from Rome proper, but from the town of Arpinum, located sixty miles south of Rome. Marius benefited from the sense of frustration in Rome over the length of the war and the perceived corruption of the aristocratic leaders abroad. Once elected, he took over the command in the war and passed the most comprehensive reforms to the Roman military since the Romans switched to the manipular legion. First, Marius abolished the property requirement for military

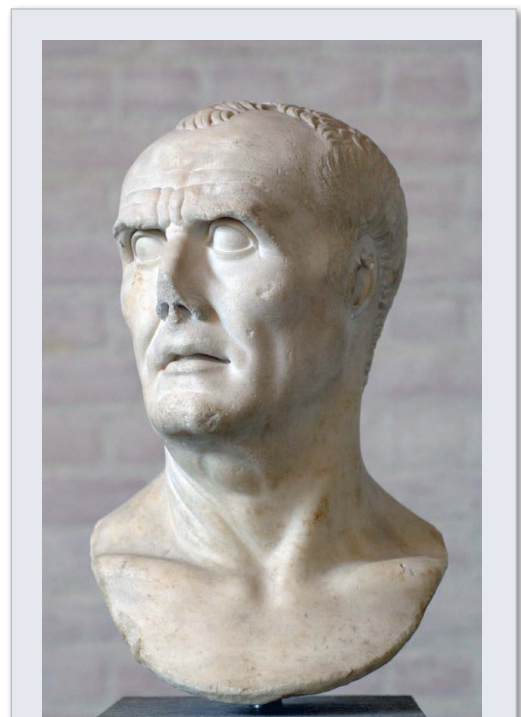


Figure 6.8 | Bust of Gaius Marius

Author: User “Direktor”

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service, allowing landless Romans to serve in the army for the first time in Roman history. A second and related change was the new commitment on the part of the Roman state to arm its troops and also pay them for service. Henceforth, the military became a profession, rather than a seasonal occupation for farmers. Finally, Marius changed the tactics of the legionary organization on the battlefield, changing the legion of maniples into a **legion of cohorts**.

Marius' reforms, while controversial, proved immensely successful, and he swiftly was able to defeat Jugurtha, ending the war in 104 BCE. As a result of his victories,



Figure 6.9 | Roman Soldiers with Aquilifer Signifer Centurio |
The Cohortal Legion after Marius. Re-enactors Portraying Legion XV Appollinaris in the First Century CE
Author: User "MatthaisKabel"
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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Figure 6.10 | Bust of Lucius Cornelius Sulla
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Marius had gained unprecedented popularity in Rome and was elected to five more successive consulships in 104 – 100 BCE. While a law existed requiring ten years between successive consulships, Marius' popularity and military success, in conjunction with the Romans' fear of on-going foreign wars, elevated him above the law. While Marius began his military career fighting for Rome, though, he ended it by causing the worst civil war Rome had seen to that point.

In 88 BCE, the Roman Senate was facing a war against Mithridates, king of Pontus, who had long been a thorn in Rome's side in the Eastern provinces of the empire. Sensing that Marius was too old to undertake the war, the Senate appointed instead Lucius Cornelius **Sulla**, a distinguished general who had started his career as Marius' quaestor in the Jugurthine War and was now a consul himself. Marius, however, had another trick up his sleeve. Summoning the Plebeian Council, Marius overturned the decision of the Senate and drove Sulla out of Rome. Instead of going lightly into exile, however, Sulla gathered an army and marched on Rome—the first time in Roman history that a Roman general led a Roman army against Rome!

Sulla took over Rome, swiftly had himself declared commander of the war on Mithridates, and departed for the Black Sea. In 86 BCE, Marius was elected consul for the seventh and final time in his career then promptly died of natural causes, just seventeen days after taking office. The civil war that he started with Sulla, though, was still far from over.

In 83 BCE, victorious over Mithridates but facing a hostile reception from the Senate, Sulla marched on Rome for the second time. This time, he truly meant business. Declaring himself dictator for reforming the Roman constitution, Sulla ruled Rome as a dictator for the next three years. His reforms aimed to prevent the rise of another Marius so significantly curtailed the powers of the plebeian tribunes. In addition, he established the **proscriptions**—a list of enemies of the state, whom anyone could kill on sight, and whose property was confiscated. Incidentally, one name on Sulla's list was the young **Julius Caesar**, whose aunt had been married to Gaius Marius. While Caesar obviously survived the proscription, and went on to become a prominent politician himself, the confiscation of his property by Sulla ensured that he remained painfully strapped financially and in debt for the rest of his life.

After enacting his reforms, Sulla just as suddenly resigned from politics, retiring to a family estate outside of Rome in 79 BCE, where he appears to have drunk himself into an early grave—based on Plutarch's description of his death, the symptoms appear to fit with cirrhosis of the liver. Over the next several decades, some of Sulla's reforms were overturned, such as those pertaining to the plebeian tribunes. Most historians of the Republic agree, however, that the Republican constitution never afterward reverted to its old state. The Republic after Sulla was a different Republic than before him.

The civil war of Marius and Sulla showed the increasingly greater degree of competition in the Republic as well as the lengths to which some Roman politicians were willing to go to get power and hold on to it. Furthermore, it demonstrated one dangerous side effect of Marius' military reforms: before Marius, Roman farmer-soldiers did not feel a personal affinity for their generals. After Marius' reforms, however, because soldiers were paid by their generals, their loyalty was to their generals, as much or more than to the Roman state. Finally, Marius' incredible political success—election to a record-setting and law-breaking seven consulships over the course of his life—showed that military ability had somewhat leveled the playing field between old patrician families such as Sulla's—that had dominated the consulship for centuries—and the newcomers to Roman politics. This challenge by the newcomers to the old Roman political families was an especially bitter pill to swallow for some.

In 63 BCE, Lucius Sergius **Catilina**, a patrician who had unsuccessfully run for consulship and who was defeated that very year by another newcomer from Arpinum, Marcus Tullius Cicero, banded with other frustrated Senators to plan a conspiracy to assassinate the consuls and take over the state. Catilina's conspiracy failed, and modern historians can read Cicero's own reports to the Senate and the people about how he discovered and stopped this conspiracy. Catilina's frustration, just like that of Sulla twenty years earlier, nevertheless shows how difficult it was for Roman "old-school" political families to accept that their competition for the consulship now was not just against each other. Catilina's plan to resort to violence to achieve power also shows just how quickly political violence became the "normal" solution to problems in Roman Republican politics after the Gracchi.

6.9.3 The First Triumvirate, and the Civil War of Caesar and Pompey

The political careers of Marius and Sulla, as well as Catilina, show the increased level of competition in the late Republic and the ruthlessness with which some Roman politicians in the period attempted to gain the consulship. In 60 BCE, however, a group of three politicians tried to achieve its goals by doing something atypical of Roman politicians who had largely only looked out for themselves: the three formed an alliance in order to help each other. Spectacularly, their alliance even transcended the usual division of *Populares* and *Optimates*, showing that, for these three men at least, the thirst for political power was more important than any other personal convictions.

Marcus Licinius **Crassus** was the wealthiest man in Rome, son of a consul, and consul himself in 70 BCE. His colleague in the consulship in 70 BCE, Gnaeus **Pompey**, achieved military fame in his youth, earning him the nickname “Magnus,” or “the Great,” from Sulla himself.

By 60 BCE, however, both Crassus and Pompey felt frustrated with their political careers so joined forces with a relative newcomer to the world of politics, Gaius Julius Caesar. The three men formed their alliance, secret at first, an alliance which Cicero later dubbed the **Triumvirate**. To cement the alliance, Caesar’s daughter, Julia, married Pompey. Together, they lobbied to help each other rise again to the consulship and achieve desirable military commands.

The alliance paid immediate dividends for Caesar, who was promptly elected consul for 59 BCE and was then awarded Gaul as his province for five years after the consulship. Crassus and Pompey, in the meanwhile, were re-elected consuls for 55 BCE, and, in the same year, Caesar’s command in Gaul was renewed for another five years. One modern historian has called it “the worst piece of legislation in Roman history,” since the renewal did not specify whether the five-year clock started afresh in 55 BCE—in which case, Caesar’s command was to end in 50 BCE—or if the five years were added to the original five-year term—in which case, Caesar’s command would have ended in 48 BCE.

A talented writer, as well as skilled general, Caesar made sure to publish an account of his Gallic campaigns in installments during his time in Gaul. As a result, Romans were continually aware of Caesar’s successes, and his popularity actually grew in his absence. His rising popularity was a source of frustration for the other two triumvirs. Finally, the already uneasy alliance disintegrated in 53 BCE. First, Julia died in childbirth, and her baby died with her. In the same year, Crassus was killed at the Battle of Carrhae, fighting the Parthians. With the death of both Julia and Crassus, no links were left connecting Caesar and Pompey; the two former family relations, albeit by marriage, swiftly became official enemies.

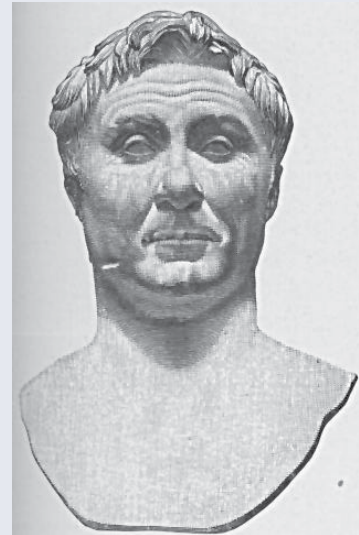


Figure 6.11 | Bust of Pompey the Great | Pompey the Great with Alexander the Great’s Hairstyle
 Author: User “Robbot”
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Late in 50 BCE, the Senate, under the leadership of Pompey, informed Caesar that his command had expired and demanded that he surrender his army. Caesar, however, refused to return to Rome as a private citizen, demanding to be allowed to stand for the consulship *in absentia*. When his demands were refused, on January 10th of 49 BCE, Caesar and his army crossed the Rubicon, a river which marked the border of his province. By leaving his province with his army against the wishes of the Senate, Caesar committed an act of treason, as defined in Roman law; the civil war began.

While most of the Senate was on Pompey's side, Caesar started the war with a distinct advantage: his troops had just spent a larger part of a decade fighting with him in Gaul; many of Pompey's army, on the other hand, was disorganized. As a result, for much of 49 BCE, Pompey retreated to the south of Italy, with Caesar in pursuit. Finally, in late 48 BCE, the two fought a decisive battle at Pharsalus in northern Greece. There, Caesar's army managed to defeat Pompey's much larger forces. After the defeat, Pompey fled to Egypt, where he was assassinated by order

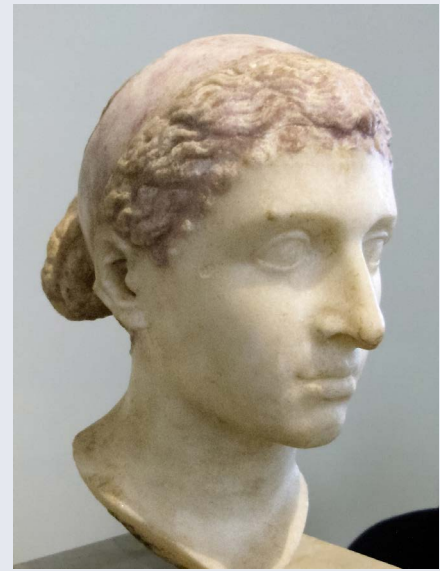


Figure 6.12 | Bust of Cleopatra VII

Author: User "Louis le Grand"

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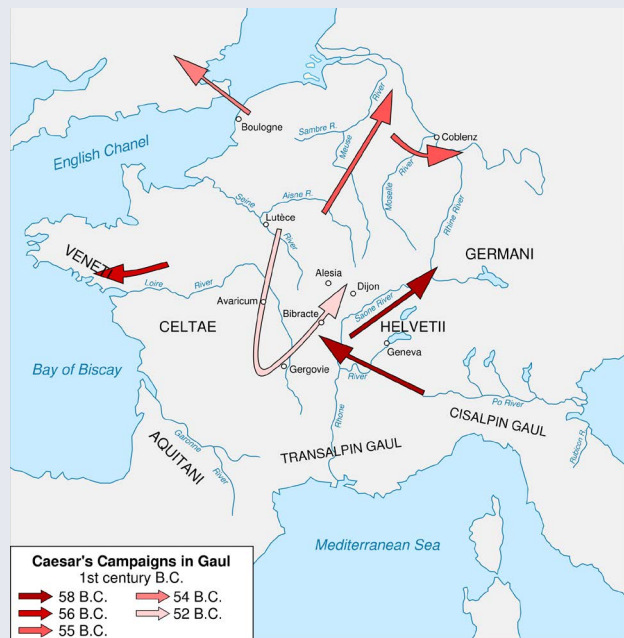


Map 6.7a | Map of Caesar's Campaigns in Gaul

Author: User "Semhur"

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Map 6.7b | Map of Caesar's Final Campaigns During the Civil War

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of Ptolemy XIII, who had hoped to win Caesar's favor by this action. When he arrived in Egypt in pursuit of Pompey, Caesar, however, sided with Ptolemy's sister **Cleopatra VII** and appears to have fathered a son with her, Caesarion.

With Pompey's death, the civil war was largely over, although Caesar still fought a number of battles across the Roman world with the remnants of the senatorial army. It is indeed striking to look at a map of Caesar's military career. While his military actions on behalf of Rome were largely limited to Gaul, with a couple of forays into Britain, his civil war against Pompey and his allies took Caesar all over the Roman world from 49 to 45 BCE.

6.9.4 Aftermath of the Civil War, the Second Triumvirate, and the Age of Augustus

Victorious in the civil war against Pompey and his supporters, Caesar was faced with the challenging question of what to do next. Clearly, he was planning to hold on to power in some way. Based on previous history, there were two options available to him: the Marius model of rule, meaning election to successive consulships, and the Sulla model, meaning dictatorship. Initially, Caesar followed the first model, holding the consulship first with a colleague in 47 BCE and 46 BCE then serving as sole consul in 45 BCE. By early 44 BCE, however, Caesar appears to have decided to

adopt the Sulla model instead. In February of 44 BCE, he took the title of ***dictator perpetuo***, or "dictator for life," and had coins minted with his image and new title. His was the first instance in Roman history of a living individual's placing his likeness on coinage.

This new title appears to have been the final straw for a group of about sixty senators who feared that Caesar aimed to make himself a king. On the Ides of March (March 15th) of 44 BCE, the conspirators rushed Caesar during a Senate meeting and stabbed him to death. But if the conspirators had thought that by assassinating Caesar they were going to restore the Republic, they turned out to be sorely mistaken.

Caesar's will, in which he left money to each resident of the city of Rome and donated his gardens for use by the public, only further increased his popularity among the people, and popular rioting ensued throughout the city. Since Caesar did not have legitimate sons who could inherit—Caesarion, his son with Cleopatra, was illegitimate—he adopted an heir in his will, a common Roman practice. The heir in question was his grand-nephew Gaius Octavius, whose name after the adoption became Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus (or Octavian, in English). It is interesting to note that Caesar's will also named a back-up heir, in case the main heir would have died before inheriting. The back-up heir was none other than Brutus, one of Caesar's assassins.



Figure 6.13 | Coin of Caesar from 44 BCE | Note Caesar's Image on One Side, and Venus on the reverse.

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Figure 6.14 | Statue of Augustus from the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta

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At the time of his adoption as Caesar's heir, Octavian was nineteen years old; thus, he was too young to have had much military or political experience. Quickly, though, he showed political acumen, initially using an alliance with two much more experienced former allies of Caesar: **Marcus Antonius** and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus. Forming what became known as the **Second Triumvirate**, the three men renewed the proscriptions in 43 BCE, aggressively pursuing the enemies of Caesar and also fighting a small-scale civil war with Caesar's assassins. The triumvirs defeated Caesar's assassins at the Battle of Philippi in northern Greece in 42 BCE; they then carved out the Roman world into regions to be ruled by each. Marcus Antonius, who claimed Egypt, although it was not yet a Roman province, proceeded to marry Cleopatra and rule Egypt with her over the following decade. Ultimately, however, another civil war resulted between Antonius and Octavian, with the latter winning a decisive victory in the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE. From that moment until his death in 14 CE, Octavian—soon to be named **Augustus** in 27 BCE, the name he subsequently used—ruled what henceforth was known as the Roman Empire, and is

considered by modern historians of Rome to have been the first emperor.

While modern historians refer to Augustus as the first emperor of Rome, that is not the title that he himself had, nor would he have said that he was inaugurating a new form of government in Rome. Rather, throughout his time in power, Augustus claimed to have restored the Roman Republic, and, with the exception of a few elected offices, he did not have any official position. How did he manage to rule the Roman Empire for over forty years without any official position? Some answers can be found in the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, an autobiography that Augustus himself composed in the year before he died and which he ordered to be posted on his Mausoleum in Rome, with copies also posted in all major cities throughout the Empire.

Reflecting on his forty-year rule in this document, Augustus described himself as the first citizen, or *princeps*, of the Roman state, superior to others in his *auctoritas*. In addition, he was especially proud of the title of "Pater Patriae," or "Father of the Fatherland," voted to him by the Senate and reflecting his status as the patron of all citizens. It is striking to consider that other than these honorary titles and positions, Augustus did not have an official position as a ruler. Indeed, having learned from Caesar's example, he avoided accepting any titles that might have smacked of a desire for kingship. Instead, he brilliantly created for himself new titles and powers, thoroughly grounded in previous, Republican tradition. In addition, he proved to be

a master diplomat, who shared power with the Senate in a way beneficial to himself, and by all of these actions seamlessly married the entire Republican political structure with one-man rule.

The question remains: when did the Roman Republic actually fall? Different historians have proposed several possible answers. One minority position is that the Republic had fallen with the dictatorship of Sulla, since it fundamentally altered the nature of the Republican government and permanently destabilized it. Another possible answer is the assassination of Caesar in 44 BCE, since afterwards, the Republic was never quite the same as it had been before the civil war of Pompey and Caesar. Another possible answer is 27 BCE, when the Senate granted Octavian the title of Augustus, recognizing his albeit unofficial consolidation of

power. Finally, yet another possible answer is the death of Augustus in 14 CE. Overall, all of these possible dates and events show the instability of the Roman state in the late first century BCE.



Figure 6.15 | Copy of the Res Gestae in Modern Ankara, Turkey

Author: User "Soerfm"

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6.9.5 Roman Culture of the Late Republic and the Augustan Age

While the political structure of the Roman Republic in its final century of existence was becoming increasingly unstable, the period from the end of the Second Punic War on was actually one of increasing flourishing of entertainment culture and literary arts in Rome. Although much of Roman literary culture was based on Greek literature, the Romans adapted what they borrowed to make it distinctly their own. Thus, while adapting Greek tragedies and comedies and, in some cases, apparently translating them wholesale, Romans still injected Roman values into them, thus making them relatable to Roman Republican audiences. For example, in one fragment from a Roman tragedy, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, adapted by the Roman poet Ennius from the Greek tragedian Euripides' play by the same name, the chorus of frustrated Greek soldiers debates the merits of *otium*, or leisure, and *negotium*, or business (a specifically Roman concept). Similarly, while Roman philosophy and rhetoric of the Republic were heavily based on their Greek counterparts,

their writers thoroughly Romanized the concepts discussed, as well as the presentation. For instance, Cicero, a preeminent rhetorician and philosopher of the late Republic, adapted the model of the Socratic dialogue in several of his philosophical treatises to make dialogues between prominent Romans of the Middle Republic. His *De Republica*, a work expressly modeled on Plato's *Republic*, features Scipio Aemilianus, the victor over Carthage in the Third Punic War.

While the late Republic was a period of growth for Roman literary arts, with much of the writing done by politicians, the age of Augustus saw an even greater flourishing of Roman literature. This increase was due in large part to Augustus' own investment in sponsoring prominent poets to write about the greatness of Rome. The three most prominent poets of the Augustan age, Virgil, Horace, and Ovid, all wrote poetry glorifying Augustan Rome. Virgil's *Aeneid*, finished in 19 BCE, aimed to be the Roman national epic and indeed achieved that goal. The epic, intended to be the Roman version of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined, told about the travels of the Trojan prince Aeneas who, by will of the gods, became the founder of Rome. Clearly connecting the Roman to the Greek heroic tradition, the epic also includes a myth explaining the origins of the Punic Wars: during his travels, before he arrived in Italy, Aeneas was ship-wrecked and landed in Carthage. Dido, the queen of Carthage, fell in love with him and wanted him to stay with her, but the gods ordered Aeneas to sail on to Italy. After Aeneas abandoned her, Dido committed suicide and cursed the future Romans to be at war with her people.

The works of Horace and Ovid were more humorous at times, but they still included significant elements from early Roman myths. They thus served to showcase the *pax deorum* that caused Rome to flourish in the past and, again now, in the age of Augustus. Ovid appears to have pushed the envelope beyond acceptable limits, whether in his poetry or in his personal conduct. Therefore, Augustus exiled him in 8 CE to the city of Tomis on the Black Sea, where Ovid spent the remainder of his life writing mournful poetry and begging unsuccessfully to be recalled back to Rome.

In addition to sponsoring literature, the age of Augustus was a time of building and rebuilding around Rome. In his *Res Gestae*, Augustus includes a very long list of temples that he had restored or built. Among some new building projects that he undertook to stand as symbols of renewal and prosperity ordained



Figure 6.16 | The Ara Pacis

Author: User "Manfred Heyde"

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by the gods themselves, none is as famous as the ***Ara Pacis***, or Altar of Peace, in Rome. The altar features a number of mythological scenes and processions of gods; it also integrates scenes of the imperial family, including Augustus himself making a sacrifice to the gods, while flanked by his grandsons Gaius and Lucius.

The message of these building projects, as well as the other arts that Augustus sponsored is, overall, simple: Augustus wanted to show that his rule was a new Golden Age of Roman history, a time when peace was restored and Rome flourished, truly blessed by the gods.

6.10 THE EARLY EMPIRE

The period from the consolidation of power by Augustus in 27 BCE to the death of the emperor Marcus Aurelius in 180 CE was one of relative peace and prosperity throughout the Roman Empire. For this reason, the Romans themselves referred to this time as the ***Pax Romana***, or Roman peace. During this period, the Empire became increasingly more of a smoothly run bureaucratic machine when commerce prospered, and the overall territory grew to its largest extent in the early second century CE. Of course, some of the Roman subjects did not feel quite as happy with this peace and what it brought to them. The Roman historian Tacitus narrates a speech of a British tribal rebel leader, Calgacus, to his men before they fought—and were defeated by—the Romans in 85 CE: “they (the Romans) make a desert, and call it peace.” Other evidence from the territories in the periphery of the Empire also shows that Romanization was not absolute, as some remote rural areas in provinces far from Italy did not really feel the impact of the Empire. Finally, the period of the early Empire witnessed the rise of a new religion, **Christianity**. This new religion did not have a profound impact on the state yet at this point, but the seeds planted in this period allowed for fundamental changes to occur centuries later. This is, after all, one of the marvels of history. It can take centuries to see the long-term impact of events that seem so small and insignificant at first.

6.10.1 The Julio-Claudian Dynasty

The historian Tacitus describes in detail the emotions in the Roman Senate upon the death of Augustus. Some Senators were hoping for the return of the Republic, while others assumed that Augustus’ stepson would inherit his nebulous yet amazingly powerful position. The scales were heavily weighed in favor of the latter option: as Tacitus points out, most Senators by 14 CE—fifty years after Caesar’s assassination—had never lived under a Republic; thus, they did not really know what a true Republic looked like. Still, the question that all were pondering in 14 CE was: how do you pass on something that does not exist? After all, Augustus did not have any official position. The first succession was a test case to see if the imperial system of government would become the new normal for Rome or if Augustus would prove to have been an exception.

Augustus himself seems to have been worried about appointing a successor for his entire time in power. Because of untimely deaths of all other possible candidates, Augustus eventually settled on adopting his stepson **Tiberius** Claudius Nero (not to be confused with the later

emperor Nero), son of his wife Livia from her first marriage. Over the final years of his life, Augustus gradually shared more of his unofficial powers with Tiberius, in order to smooth the process of succession. Augustus' plan appears to have worked, as after a brief conversation in the Senate, as Tacitus reports, the Senators conferred upon Tiberius all of Augustus' previous powers. Tiberius' succession is the reason for which historians refer to the first Roman imperial dynasty as the **Julio-Claudians**.

Tiberius, a decorated military general in his youth, appears in our sources as a sullen and possibly cruel individual, whose temperament made Augustus himself feel sorry for the Romans for leaving such a ruler in his stead—or so Suetonius tells us.

He also appears to have been a rather reluctant emperor, who much preferred life out of the public eye. Finally, in 26 CE, Tiberius retired to Capri for the final eleven years of his rule. It is a testament to the spectacular bureaucratic system that was the Roman Empire that the eleven-year absence of the emperor was hardly felt, one exception being a foiled plot against Tiberius by his chief trusted advisor in Rome, Sejanus.

Similarly to Augustus, Tiberius had a difficult time selecting a successor, as repeatedly, each relative who was identified as a candidate died an untimely death. Ultimately, Tiberius adopted as his successor his grandnephew Gaius **Caligula**, or “little boot,” son of the popular military hero Germanicus, who died young.

While Caligula began his power with full support of both the people and the Senate, and with an unprecedented degree of popularity, he swiftly proved to be mentally unstable and bankrupted the state in his short rule of just under four years. In 41 CE, he was assassinated by three disgruntled officers in the Praetorian Guard, which ironically was the body formed by Augustus in order to protect the emperor.

Caligula's assassination left Rome in disarray. The biographer Suetonius reports that, while the

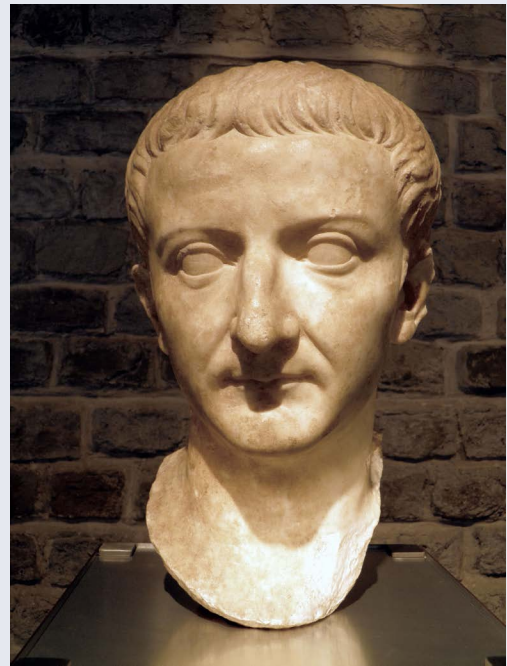


Figure 6.17 | Bust of the Emperor Tiberius

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Figure 6.18 | Bust of the Emperor Caligula

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Figure 6.19 | Bust of the Emperor Claudius

Author: User "Direktor"

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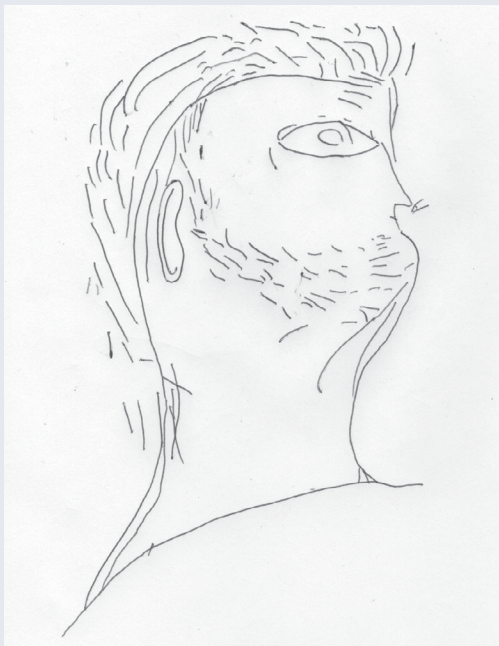


Figure 6.20 | Sketch of an Ancient Graffito of the Emperor Nero

Author: User "Shakko"

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confused Senate was meeting and planning to declare the restoration of the Roman Republic, the Praetorian Guard proclaimed as the next emperor **Claudius**, uncle of Caligula and the brother of Germanicus.

While Claudius was a member of the imperial family, he was never considered a candidate for succession before. He had a speech impediment; as a result, Augustus considered him an embarrassment to the imperial family. Claudius proved to be a productive emperor, but his downfall appears to have been pretty women of bad character, as he repeatedly weathered plots against his life by first one wife and then the next. Finally, in 54 CE, Claudius died and was widely believed to have been poisoned by his wife, Agrippina the Younger. Since the cause, as Suetonius tells us, was mushrooms, a popular joke thereafter in Rome was that mushrooms were the food of the gods—a reference to the deification of most emperors after their death.

Although Claudius had a biological son from an earlier marriage, that son was poisoned soon after his death. His successor instead became **Nero**, his stepson, who was only sixteen years old when he gained power.

Showing the danger of inexperience for an emperor, Nero gradually alienated the Senate, the people, and the army over the course of his fourteen-year rule. He destroyed his own reputation by performing on stage—behavior that was considered disgraceful in Roman society. Furthermore, Nero is believed in 64 CE to have caused the great fire of Rome in order to free up space in the middle of the city for his ambitious new palace, the Domus Aurea, or Golden House.

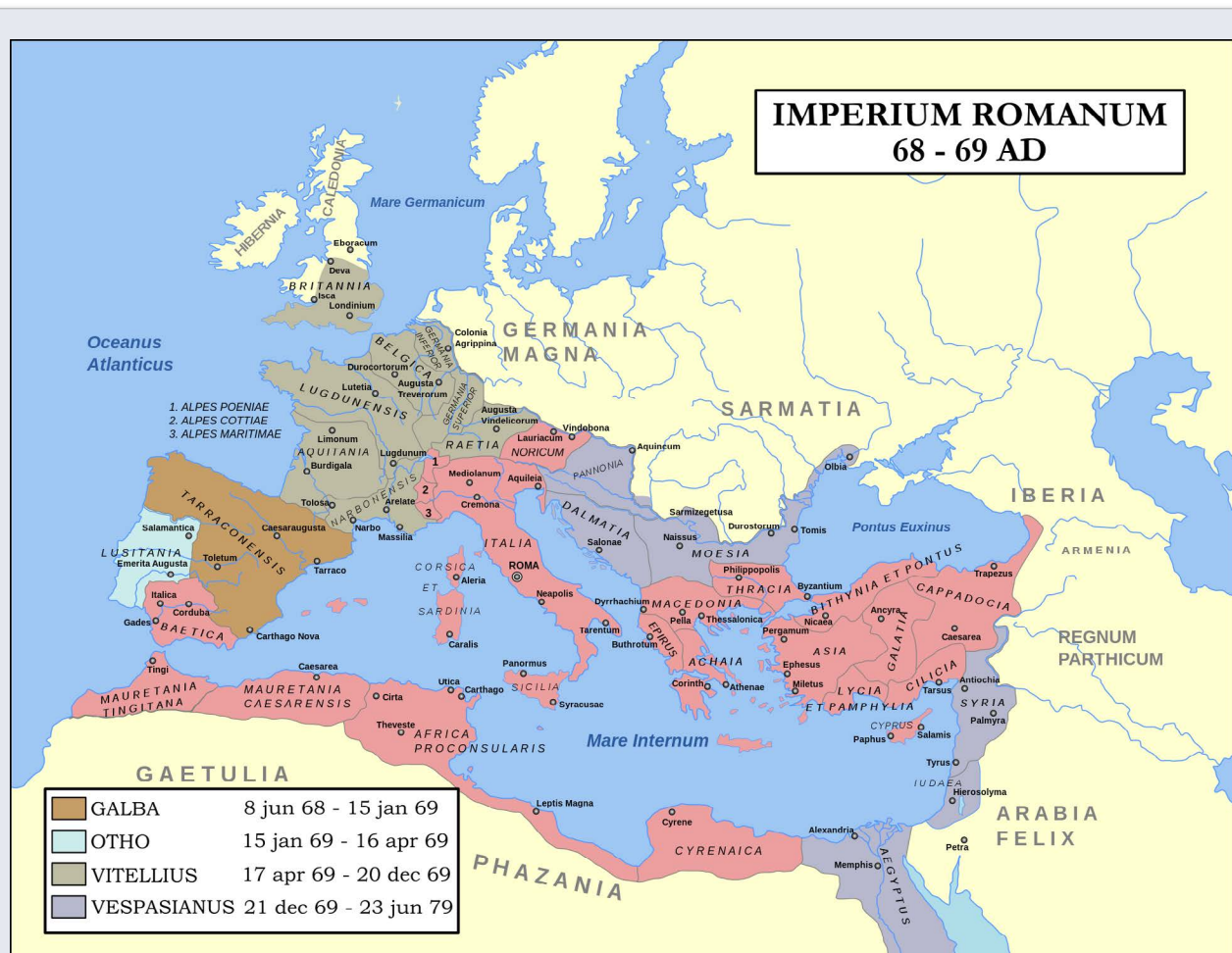
The last years of Nero's reign seem to have been characterized by provincial rebellions, as a revolt broke out in Judea in 66 CE, and then the governor of Gaul, Gaius Julius Vindex, also rebelled against Nero. The revolt of Vindex ultimately proved to be the end of Nero, since Vindex convinced the governor of Spain, Servius Sulpicius Galba, to join the rebellion and, furthermore, proclaim himself emperor. While the rebellion of Vindex was quickly squashed, and Vindex himself committed suicide, popular support for Galba

grew just as quickly. Finally, terrified by rumors of Galba marching to Rome, Nero committed suicide in June of 68 CE. His death marked the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.

6.10.2 The Year of the Four Emperors, the Flavian Dynasty, and the Five Good Emperors

The year and a half after Nero’s death saw more civil war and instability throughout the empire than any other period since the late Republic. In particular, the year 69 CE became known as the year of the four emperors, as four emperors in succession came to power: Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian. Each challenged his predecessor to a civil war, and each was as swiftly defeated by the next challenger.

In the process, as the historian Tacitus later noted, the year of the four emperors revealed two key secrets that continued to be a factor in subsequent history of the Empire. First, emperors



Map 6.8 | Map of the Roman Empire 68-69 CE | Year of the Four Emperors

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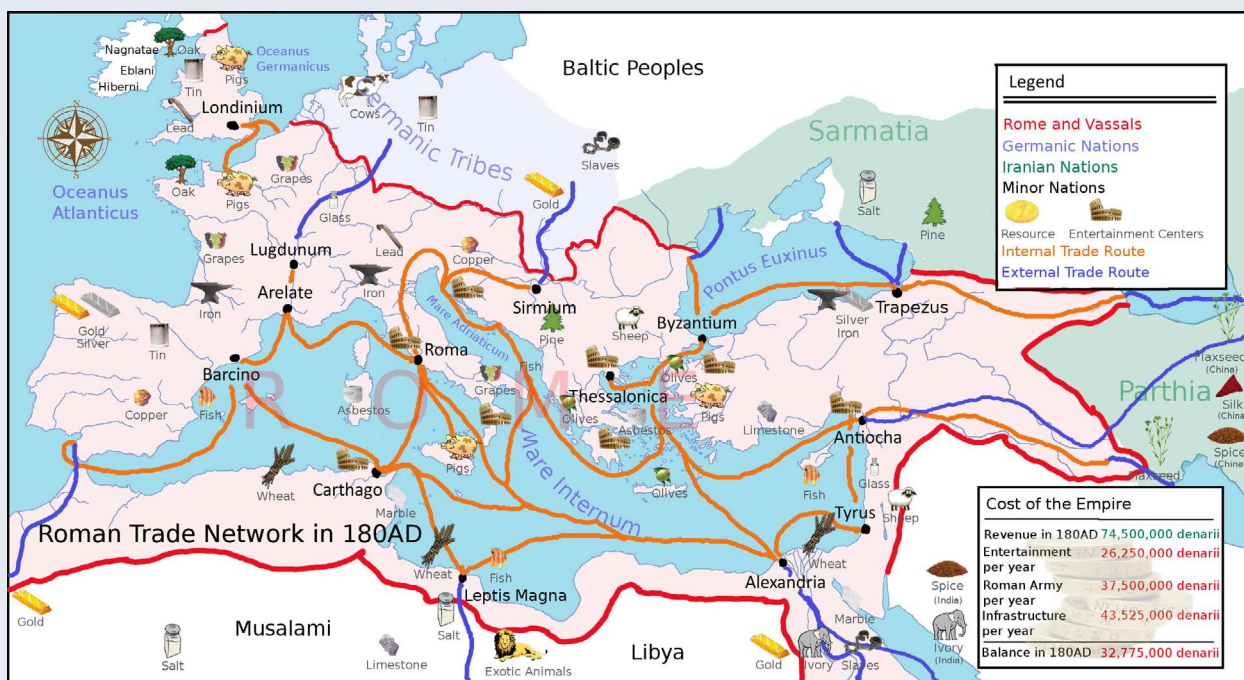
could now be made outside of Rome, as seen, for example, with Galba’s proclamation as emperor in Spain. Second, the army could make emperors; indeed, each of the four emperors in 69 CE was proclaimed emperor by his troops. These two *arcana imperii*, or “secrets of empire,” as Tacitus dubbed them, continued to play a strong role in subsequent history of the Roman Empire. Their unveiling showed the declining importance of Rome as the center of political power and the concomitant decline in the importance of the Senate, once an advisory body to the entire empire, but now increasingly confined in its authority to Rome proper alone.

Several reasons caused **Vespasian**, a mere son of a tax-collector, to be the only successful emperor of 69 CE and the founder of the **Flavian dynasty**. First, a talented military commander, Vespasian



Figure 6.21 | Arch of Titus | Arch of Titus, celebrating his victory over Judaea, and featuring images of war spoils on the inside.

Author: User “Jebulon”
 Source: Wikimedia Commons
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Map 6.9 | Map of Roman Trade Routes | This map of Roman trade routes c. 180 CE shows the economic prosperity in the urban centers.

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proved to be already in command of a major military force in 69 CE, since he had been working on subduing the Jewish Revolt since 67 CE. Ironically, Nero had originally appointed him to command the Jewish War because of Vespasian's humble family origins—which to Nero meant that he was not a political threat. Second, Vespasian was the only one of the four emperors of 69 CE who had grown sons, and thus obvious successors. Furthermore, his older son, Titus, was already a popular military commander in his own right and cemented his reputation even further by his conquest of Jerusalem in 70 CE.

The Flavian dynasty did not last long, however, as it ended in 96 CE with the assassination of Emperor Domitian, Vespasian's younger son. The period from 96 CE to 180 CE saw a different experiment in determining imperial succession, instead of establishing traditional dynasties in which sons succeeded their fathers. Known as the period of the “**Five Good Emperors**,” the trend in the second century CE was for each emperor to adopt a talented leader with potential as his successor. The result was what Edward Gibbon, the nineteenth-century British historian of Rome, called “the happiest age” of mankind. But was life everywhere in the Roman Empire in the second century equally happy for all? The evidence suggests that while Rome and other major urban centers flourished, life in the periphery could be a very different experience.

6.10.3 Center Versus Periphery in the Roman Empire: the Evidence of Pliny and Apuleius

Much of extant evidence from the Roman Empire comes from Rome and Italy. As is so often the case with empires, though, life in Rome was not representative of everyday life in the empire. The problems with which residents of Rome had to contend were a far cry from those with which residents of distant provinces had to deal. Careful examination of two sources from the second century CE reveals that the relationship of the Roman Empire to the provinces in the periphery was often uneasy. Writing about two different provinces within a half-century of each other, the two sources, Pliny the Younger and Apuleius, show the complicated blessings of living in a province far away from Rome that was yet under Roman rule.

It is shocking to consider today that most Roman governors setting out for the job received just one type of personnel to assist them with their duties: a flute-player, whose job was to play during sacrifice ceremonies. Since military forces were expensive to maintain and needed for emergencies in those areas of the Empire considered to be the most at risk for rebellion or outside attack, most governors did not have a legion stationed in their province. So how did governors resolve problems, and what resources did they find when they arrived? The single best sources of information about Roman provincial government is the prolific letter-writer Pliny the Younger, who served as governor of the province of **Bithynia** on the shore of the Black Sea in 111 – 113 CE. Pliny was a cautious and conscientious governor, and thus believed in consulting the emperor **Trajan** on every single issue that he encountered in his province. Luckily for us, their correspondence survives.

Pliny's letters reveal a myriad of problems that the governor was expected to solve: staffing personnel for prisons (is it acceptable to use slaves as prison guards?), building repairs and water supply, abandoned infants and their legal status (should they be considered slave-born or free?),

fire brigades (are they a potential security risk to the Empire?) and, most famously, what to do with Christians in the province. The emperor Trajan patiently responded to each letter that he received from Pliny and appears to have placed stability and peace in the province foremost in his concerns. Thus, for instance, with regard to the issue of Christians in Bithynia, Trajan recommends that Pliny not worry about tracking down Christians in his province, as they were not a threat.

Another perspective from the periphery comes from the novel *Metamorphoses* or *Golden Ass*, written by the North African intellectual Apuleius sometime in the later part of the second century CE. The protagonist of the novel, Lucius, is a curious intellectual who is traveling through Greece and, through a magic experiment gone wrong, accidentally is turned into a donkey. For the remainder of the novel, Lucius, in his donkey form, is repeatedly stolen, traded, beaten, and abused, until finally being rescued at the end of the novel by the Egyptian goddess Isis, whose service he then enters as a priest. Throughout his travels, though, Lucius' observations reveal the limits of Romanization in the remote parts of Greece. Law and order are largely absent, highway robbery is simply a normal part of life, and on the one occasion when a poor farmer runs into a Roman soldier on the road, the soldier forcibly requisitions the farmer's sole possession: his donkey. Overall, the picture that Apuleius paints reveals the dark side of the *Pax Romana*. Yes, the Empire was at peace, and few attacks were happening on the frontiers. Yet life in the provinces was anything but truly peaceful.

6.10.4 Early Christianity in the Context of the Roman Empire

One of the problems that arose in Bithynia during Pliny's time as governor in 111 – 113 CE involved procedural questions on how to treat Christians in the province. Pliny does not seem to have much knowledge about them but is struck by what he describes as their stubbornness in clinging to their faith even when threatened with death. As he points out in his letter on the subject to Trajan, he has judged this stubbornness alone sufficient to merit punishment, presumably because it showed a dangerous level of disrespect towards Roman rule. Pliny's perspective is one of the earliest non-Christian sources about the new religion and shows how quickly it had spread over the Empire. But how and why did the new religion spread so rapidly over the Empire, and why was it so attractive to different populations? After all, quite a number of different cults and self-proclaimed prophets periodically appeared in the Roman world, yet none had the long-term impact of Christianity, which just two centuries after Pliny's day became the religion of the Roman emperor himself.

Early Christianity is, in some ways, an ancient historian's dream: for few other topics in Roman history do we have so many primary sources from both the perspective of insiders and outsiders, beginning with the earliest days of the movement. The **New Testament**, in particular, is a collection of primary sources by early Christians about their movement, with some of the letters composed merely twenty-five years after Jesus' crucifixion. It is a remarkably open document, collecting theological beliefs and stories about Jesus on which the faith was built. At the same time, however, the New Testament does not "white-wash" the early churches; rather, it documents their failings and short-comings with remarkable frankness, allowing the historian to

consider the challenges that the early Christians faced from not only the outside but also within the movement.

The story of the origins of the faith is explained more plainly in the four Gospels, placed at the beginning of the New Testament. While different emphases are present in each of the four Gospels, the basic story is as follows: God himself came to earth as a human baby, lived a life among the Jews, performed a number of miracles that hinted at his true identity, but ultimately was crucified, died, and rose again on the third day. His resurrection proved to contemporary witnesses that his teachings were true and inspired many of those who originally rejected him to follow him. While the movement originated as a movement within Judaism, it ultimately flourished in Judea but quickly spread throughout the Greek-speaking world—due to the work of such early missionaries as **Paul**. (Visit the following link to view a map of Paul’s missionary journeys: <http://www.allaboutturkey.com/highres/paulsjourneys.jpg>.)

It would be no exaggeration to call the early Christian movement revolutionary. In a variety of respects, it went completely against every foundational aspect of Roman (and, really, Greek) society. First, the Christian view of God was very different from the pagan conceptions of gods throughout the ancient Mediterranean. While in traditional Roman paganism the gods had petty concerns and could treat humans unfairly, if they so wished, Christianity by contrast presented the message that God himself became man and dwelt with men as an equal. This concept of God incarnate had revolutionary implications for social relations in a Christian worldview. For early Christians, their God’s willingness to take on humanity and then sacrifice himself for the sins of the world served as the greatest equalizer: since God had suffered for all of them, they were all equally important to him, and their social positions in the Roman world had no significance in God’s eyes. Finally, early Christianity was an apocalyptic religion. Many early Christians believed that Jesus was coming back soon, and they eagerly awaited his arrival, which would erase all inequality and social distinctions.

By contrast, traditional Roman society, as the conflict of the orders in the early Republic showed, was extremely stratified. While the conflict of the orders was resolved by the mid-Republic, sharp divisions between the rich and poor remained. While social mobility was



Figure 6.22 | Christ as the Good Shepherd in a Third-Century CE Catacomb Painting

Author: User "Wafflws9761"

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possible—for instance, slaves could be freed, and within a generation, their descendants could be Senators—extreme mobility was the exception rather than the rule. Furthermore, gender roles in Roman society were extremely rigid, as all women were subject to male authority. Indeed, the *paterfamilias*, or head of the household, had the power of life or death over all living under his roof, including in some cases adult sons, who had their own families. Christianity challenged all of these traditional relationships, nullifying any social differences, and treating the slave and the free the same way. Furthermore, Christianity provided a greater degree of freedom than women had previously known in the ancient world, with only the Stoics coming anywhere close in their view on gender roles. Christianity allowed women to serve in the church and remain unmarried, if they so chose, and even to become heroes of the faith by virtue of their lives or deaths, as in the case of the early martyrs. Indeed, the *Passion of the Saints Perpetua and Felicity*, which documents the two women’s martyrdom in Carthage in 203 CE, shows all of these reversals of Roman tradition in practice.

The Passion of the Saints Perpetua and Felicity was compiled by an editor shortly after the fact and includes Perpetua’s own prison diary, as she awaited execution. The inclusion of a woman’s writings already makes the text unusual, as virtually all surviving texts from the Roman world are by men. In addition, Perpetua was a noblewoman, yet she was imprisoned and martyred together with her slave, Felicity. The two women, as the text shows, saw each other as equals, despite their obvious social distinction. Furthermore, Perpetua challenged her father’s authority as *paterfamilias* by refusing to obey his command to renounce her faith and thus secure freedom. Such outright disobedience would have been shocking to Roman audiences. Finally, both Perpetua and Felicity placed their role as mothers beneath their Christian identity, as both gave up their babies in order to be able to be martyred. Their story, as those of other martyrs, was truly shocking in their rebellion against Roman values, but their extraordinary faith in the face of death proved to be contagious. As recent research shows, conversion in the Roman Empire sped up over the course of the second and third centuries CE, despite periodic persecutions by such emperors as Septimius Severus, who issued an edict in 203 CE forbidding any conversions to Judaism and Christianity. That edict led to the execution of Perpetua and Felicity.

Most of the early Christians lived less eventful (and less painful) lives than Perpetua and Felicity, but the reversals to tradition inherent in Christianity appear clearly in their lives as well. First, the evidence of the New Testament, portions of which were written as early as the 60s CE, shows that the earliest Christians were from all walks of life; Paul, for instance, was a tent-maker. Some other professions of Christians and new converts that are mentioned in the New Testament include prison guards, Roman military officials of varying ranks, and merchants. Some, like Paul, were Roman citizens, with all the perks inherent in that position, including the right of appeal to the Emperor and the right to be tried in Rome. Others were non-citizen free males of varying provinces, women, and slaves. Stories preserved in *Acts* and in the epistles of Paul that are part of the New Testament reveal ways—the good, the bad, and the ugly—in which these very different people tried to come together and treat each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. Some of the struggles that these early churches faced included sexual scandal (the Corinthian church witnessed the affair of a stepmother with her stepson), unnecessary quarrelling and litigation between

members, and the challenge of figuring out the appropriate relationship between the requirements of Judaism and Christianity (to circumcise or not to circumcise? That was the question. And then there were the strict Jewish dietary laws). It is important to note that early Christianity appears to have been predominantly an urban religion and spread most quickly throughout urban centers. Thus Paul's letters address the churches in different cities throughout the Greek-speaking world and show the existence of a network of relationships between the early churches, despite the physical distance between them. Through that network, the churches were able to carry out group projects, such as fundraising for areas in distress, and could also assist Christian missionaries in their work. By the early second century CE, urban churches were led by bishops, who functioned as overseers for spiritual and practical matters of the church in their region.

6.11 THE THIRD-CENTURY CRISIS, AND LATE ANTIQUITY

While the second century CE was a time when the Empire flourished, the third century was a time of crisis, defined by political instability and civil wars, which ultimately demonstrated that the Empire had become too large to be effectively controlled by one ruler. Furthermore, the increasing pressures on the frontiers, which required emperors to spend much of their time on campaigns, resulted in the decline of the importance of the city of Rome. By the end of the third century, an experiment with dividing the empire showed a different model of rule, one which lasted, albeit with some interludes, until the last Western emperor, **Romulus Augustulus**, was deposed in 476 CE. While the political narrative of the third century and Late Antiquity could be described as a story of decline and fall of the Roman Empire (as the British historian Gibbon famously called it), nevertheless, it was a period in which culture, and especially Christian culture, flourished and replaced the traditional Roman pagan mode of thinking. Far from being culturally a time of “decline and fall,” Late Antiquity, rather, was looking forward to the world of the Middle Ages. It was also the period of Roman history that produced some of its most influential leaders, most notably, Constantine.

6.11.1 The Third-Century Crisis and Diocletian

Although composed during a time of prosperity in the Empire, Apuleius' novel *Metamorphoses* showed tensions in the provinces, indicative of the failure of Empire to govern all portions equally effectively. While not visible in the larger urban centers until the third century CE, these tensions manifested themselves clearly during the third-century crisis, a period of almost fifty years (235 – 284 CE) that was characterized by unprecedented political, social, and economic upheaval across the Empire. In effect, the **third-century crisis** was the year 69 CE repeated, but this time it stretched over half a century. The same secrets of power that 69 CE revealed for the first time—that armies could make emperors and that emperors could be made outside of Rome—were now on display yet again.

In 235 CE, the emperor Severus Alexander was assassinated by his troops on campaign, who then proclaimed as emperor their general Maximinus Thrax. Over the subsequent half-century, twenty-six emperors were officially recognized by the Roman Senate, and a number of others



Map 6.10 | Map of the Roman Empire during the Third-Century Crisis

Author: User "Wanwa"

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were proclaimed emperors but did not live long enough to consolidate power and be officially accepted as emperors by the Senate. Most of these new emperors were military generals who were proclaimed by their troops on campaign. Most of them did not have any previous political experience and thus had no clear program for ruling the empire. The competing claims resulted in the temporary breaking away from the Roman Empire of regions to the East and the Northwest.

The political instability that resulted was not, however, the only problem with which the Empire had to contend. In addition to political upheaval and near-constant civil wars, the Empire was also dealing with increasing pressures on the frontiers, a plague that devastated the population, a famine, and rampant inflation. Roman emperors, starting with Nero, had been debasing the Roman coinage, but not until the third-century crisis did the inflation hit in full force.

The third-century crisis showed that a single emperor stationed in Rome was no longer equipped to deal with the challenges of ruling such a vast territory. And, indeed, so recognized the man who ended the crisis: the emperor **Diocletian**. Born to a socially insignificant family in the province of Dalmatia, Diocletian had a successful military career. Proclaimed emperor by his troops in 284 CE, Diocletian promptly displayed a political acumen that none of his predecessors in the third century possessed. Realizing that, as the third-century crisis showed, a single emperor in charge of the entire empire was a “sitting duck,” whose assassination would throw the entire

empire into yet another civil war, Diocletian established a new system of rule: the **Tetrarchy**, or the rule of four. He divided the empire into four regions, each with its own capital.

It is important to note that Rome was not the capital of its region. Diocletian clearly wanted to select as capitals cities with strategic importance, taking into account such factors as proximity to problematic frontiers. Of course, as a Dalmatian of low birth, Diocletian also lacked the emotional connection to Rome that the earliest emperors possessed. Two of the regions of the Tetrarchy were ruled by senior emperors, named Augusti (“Augustus” in the singular), and two were ruled by junior emperors, named Caesares (“Caesar” in the singular). One of the Augusti was Diocletian himself, with Maximian as the second Augustus. The two men’s sons-in-law, Galerius and Constantus Chlorus, became the two Caesares. Finally, it is important to note that in addition to reforming imperial rule, Diocletian attempted to address other major problems, such as inflation, by passing the Edict of Maximum Prices. This edict set a maximum price that could be charged on basic goods and services in the Empire. He also significantly increased the imperial bureaucracy.



Map 6.11 | Map of the Roman Empire under the Tetrarchy

Author: Coppermine Photo Gallery

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In a nutshell, as some modern historians have described him, Diocletian was the most significant Roman reformer since Augustus.

Diocletian's political experiment was most clearly successful in achieving one goal: ending the third-century crisis. The four men were able to rule the empire and restore a degree of political stability. A statue column of the Tetrarchs together displays their message of unity in rule: the four men are portrayed identically, so it is impossible to tell them apart. Showing their predominantly military roles, they are dressed in military garb, rather than the toga, the garb of politicians and citizens, and each holds one hand on the hilt of his sword and hugs one of the other Tetrarchs with the other.

While it succeeded in restoring stability to the Empire, inherent within the Tetrarchy was the question of succession, which turned out to be a much greater problem than Diocletian had anticipated. Hoping to provide for a smooth transition of power, Diocletian abdicated in 305 CE and required Maximian to do the same. The two Caesars, junior emperors, were promptly promoted to Augusti, and two new Caesars were appointed. The following year, however, Constantius Chlorus, a newly minted Augustus, died. His death resulted in a series of wars for succession, which ended Diocletian's experiment of the Tetrarchy. The wars ended with Constantius' son, **Constantine**, reuniting the entire Roman Empire under his rule in 324 CE. In the process, Constantine also brought about a major religious shift in the Empire.



Figure 6.23 | State Column of the Tetrarchs

Author: Nino Barbieri

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6.11.2 From Constantine to the Last Pagans of Rome

While traditional Roman religion was the ultimate melting pot, organically incorporating a broad variety of new cults and movements from the earliest periods of Roman expansion, Christianity's monotheistic exclusivity challenged traditional Roman religion and transformed Roman ways of thinking about religion in late antiquity. By the early fourth century CE, historians estimate that about ten percent of those living in the Roman Empire were Christians. With Constantine, however, this changed, and the previously largely underground faith grew exponentially because of the emperor's endorsement. The emperor's conversion must have seemed nothing short of miraculous to contemporaries, and a miracle is told to explain it in contemporary sources. Before a major battle in 312

CE, Constantine reportedly had a dream or a vision in which Christ himself told Constantine to place the Greek letters X and P (Chi, Rho, the first two letters of Christ's name in the Greek alphabet) on his soldiers' shields in order to assure victory.

Grateful for his subsequent victory, Constantine proceeded to play a major role in the government of the church over the course of his rule, although he was not baptized himself until he was on his deathbed. Constantine, for instance, summoned the First **Council of Nicaea** in 325 CE, which gathered major bishops from all over the Empire. The Council settled, among other issues, the question of the relationship of God the Father and God the Son, declaring them to have been one being from the creation of the world, thus affirming the doctrine of the Trinity. The Council set a significant precedent for communication of bishops in the Empire. It ended up being merely the first

of seven major ecumenical councils, the last of them being the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 CE. The councils allowed the increasingly different churches of the Eastern and Western parts of the Roman Empire to work together on key doctrines and beliefs of the church.

Last but not least, Constantine's rule marked the end of the city of Rome as the capital of the Roman Empire. Upon reuniting the Empire in 324 CE, Constantine established his capital at the old location of the Greek city of Byzantium, but renamed it **Constantinople** (the location of Byzantium appears on Map 6.11). The location had strategic advantages for the Empire at that stage. First, it had an excellent harbor. Second, it was close to the Persian frontier, as well as the Danube frontier, a trouble area that required attention from the emperor. Finally, building this new city, to which he also referred as "New Rome," allowed Constantine to send the message that his rule was a new beginning of sorts for the Roman Empire, which was now to be a Christian empire.

With the Emperor's backing, Christianity seems to have grown exponentially over the course of the fourth century CE, much to the chagrin of **Julian the Apostate**, Rome's final pagan emperor, who tried hard to restore traditional Roman paganism during his brief rule (361 – 363 CE). Finally, the Emperor **Theodosius** gradually banned paganism altogether by 395 CE. Thus a mere eighty-three years after Constantine's initial expression of support for Christianity, it became the official religion of Rome. Paganism continued to limp on for another century or so, but without state support, it slowly died out.

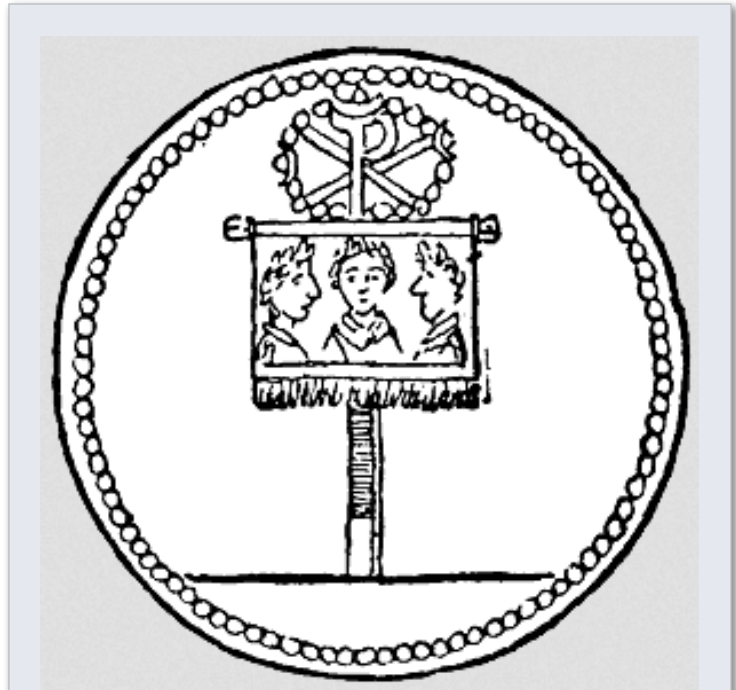


Figure 6.24 | Constantine's Military Standard
| Reconstruction of Constantine's Military Standard,
Incorporating the Chi Rho letters

Author: Nordisk Familjebok
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6.11.3 The Decline of the Empire—Looking Forward while Looking Back with Augustine and the Last Pagans of Rome

Imagine that you are a citizen of the greatest empire on earth. In fact, you reside in the greatest city of the greatest empire on earth. You feel protected by the pact that was made between the founders of your state and the traditional gods. The *pax deorum*, or peace with the gods, struck a clear bargain: as long as you and your state worshipped the gods and maintained peace with them, they would make it prosper. And prosper it did! Starting out as a tiny village on the marshes of the Tiber, the Roman Empire at its height encircled the entire Mediterranean, extending to Britain and the Rhine and Danube frontiers to the north, and including a wide strip of North Africa in its southern half. But something went so terribly wrong along the way, testing the gods' patience with Rome. A new sect started out in Judaea in the first century CE, one which followed a crucified Messiah. Spreading outward like a wildfire to all parts of the empire, this sect challenged and gradually replaced the worship of the traditional gods, bringing even the emperors into its fold, starting with Constantine in the early fourth century CE. This outright violation of the thousand-year old pact between the Romans and their gods could have only one outcome:



Figure 6.24 | Fresco Painting of Augustine, Sixth Century CE

Author: User "Mladifilozof"
Source: Wikimedia Commons
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the ultimate punishment would come from the gods upon this rebellious state. And come it did; in 410 CE, the unthinkable happened. The city of Rome, untouched by foreign foe since the early days of the Republic, was sacked by the Goths, a Germanic tribe, led by the fearsome Alaric. How could something so terrible happen? And how could the Roman Empire recover from it? Such was the thought process of the typical Roman pagan, and especially the pagan aristocrat, as few of those as were left by 410 CE. And it was in response to these questions that Augustine, veteran theologian, philosopher, and bishop of Hippo in North Africa, wrote the final *magnum opus* of his career, the monumental twenty-two-book effort that he appropriately titled *De Civitate Dei Contra Paganos*, or **On the City of God** against the Pagans.

It is no coincidence that Peter Brown, the scholar credited with creating the academic field of study of Late Antiquity, began his career as a researcher by writing a biography of Augustine. Indeed, no other figure exemplifies so clearly the different culture that emerged in Late Antiquity, a culture of rethinking the Roman past, with an eye to a future in which Rome no longer existed as the capital of the Roman Empire. Born in North Africa in 354 CE, Augustine was

educated in Rome and Milan, and, after a wild youth—about which he tells us in his *Confessions*—he rose to the post of the Bishop of Hippo in 396 CE. A famous figure by 410 CE, he was ideally suited to address the tragedy of the sack of Rome and the concerns that this event inspired in Christians and pagans alike.

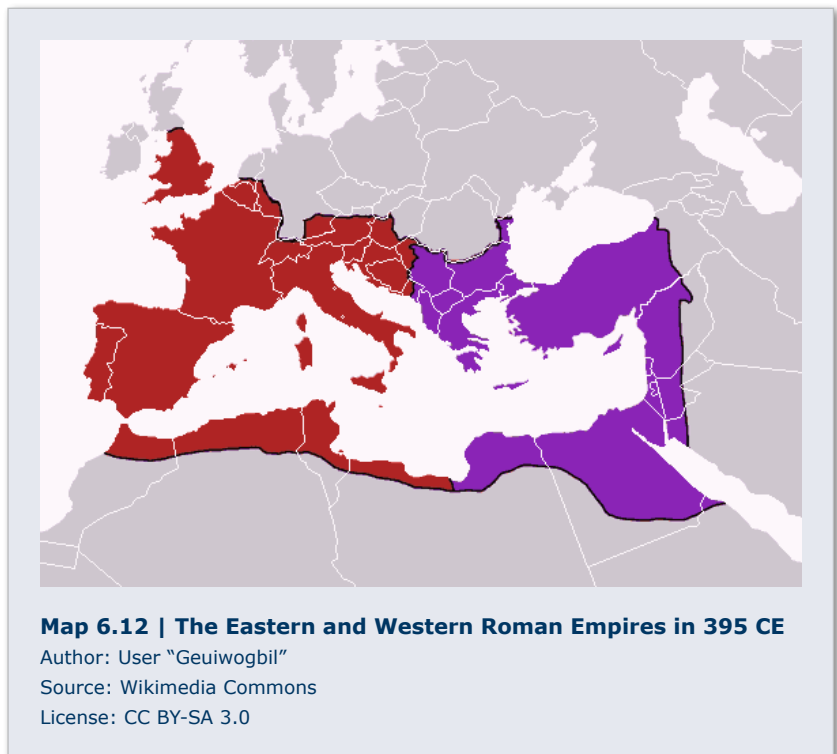
In his book, Augustine presented an argument that challenged the core of Roman traditional beliefs about the state. Challenging the fundamental Roman pagan belief that Roman success was the result of the *pax deorum*, Augustine effectively argued that there was nothing special about Rome. It only prospered in its earlier history because God allowed it to do so. Furthermore, argued Augustine, obsession with Rome, emblematic of obsession with the earthly kingdom and way of life, was the wrong place for turning one's attention. The City of God was the only place that mattered, and the City of God was most definitely not Rome. By turning away from this world and focusing on the next, one could find true happiness and identity as a citizen of God's kingdom, which is the only city that is everlasting and free from threat of invasion or destruction.

Augustine's message would have made the Republican hero Cincinnatus weep. For Cincinnatus, nothing was more valuable than Rome. For Augustine, however, nothing was less valuable than Rome.

6.12 CONCLUSION: FROM LATE ANTIQUITY TO THE MIDDLE AGES

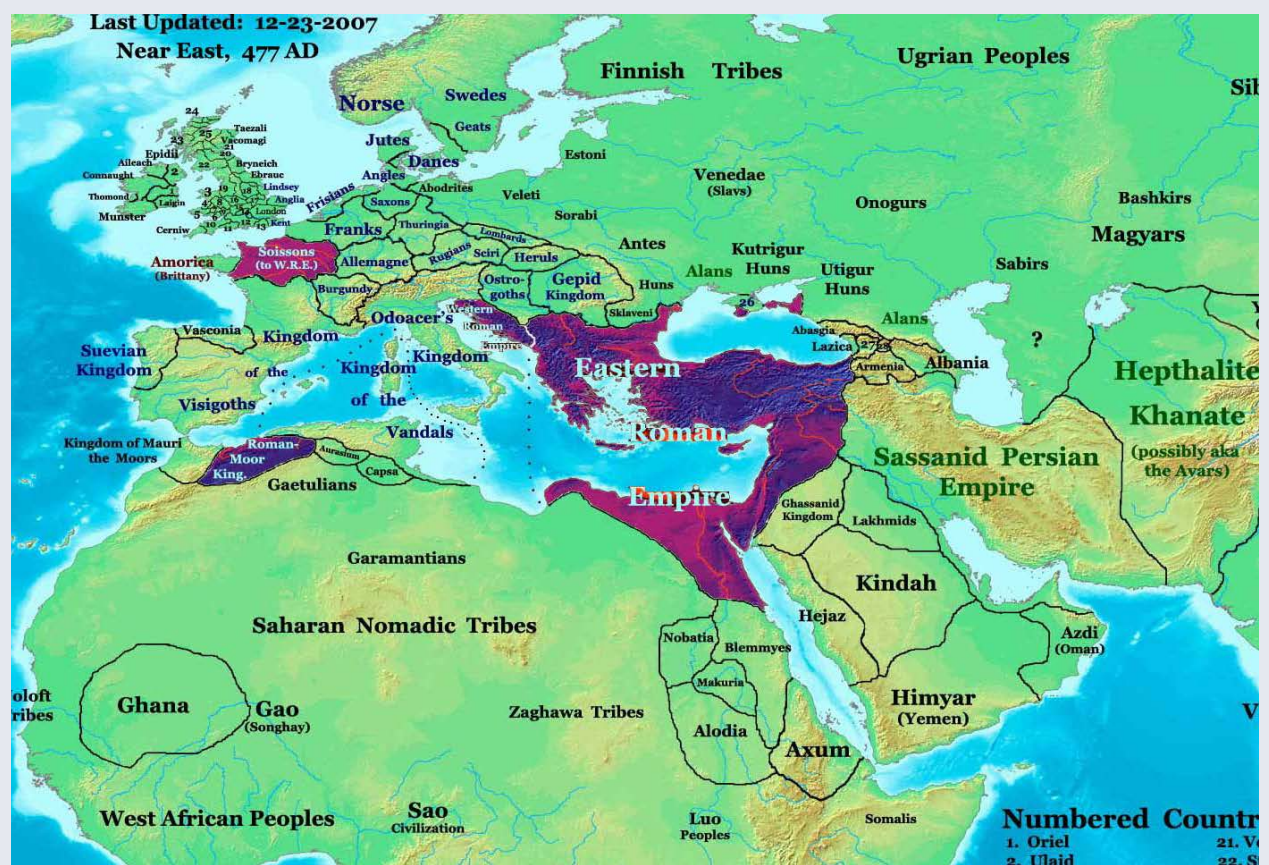
After the death of the Emperor Theodosius in 395 CE, the Roman Empire became permanently divided into Eastern and Western Empires, with instability and pressures on the frontiers continuing, especially in the West.

The sack of Rome by the Goths in 410 CE, which so shocked Augustine's contemporaries, was followed by an equally destructive sack of Carthage by the Vandals in 439 CE, as well as continuing raids of Roman territories by the Huns, a nomadic tribe from Eastern Europe, the Caucasus region, and south-eastern China. The Huns experienced an especially prolific period of conquest in the 440s and early 450s CE under the leadership of Attila. While they were not able to hold on to their conquests after Attila's death in 453 CE, their attacks further destabilized an already weakened Western



Roman Empire. Finally, the deposition of the Emperor Romulus Augustulus in 476 CE marked the end of the Roman Empire in the West, although the Eastern half of the Empire continued to flourish for another thousand years.

The fall of the Roman Empire in the West, however, was not really as clear and dramatic a fall as might seem. A number of tribes carved out territories, each for its own control. Over the next five hundred years, led by ambitious tribal chiefs, these territories coalesced into actual kingdoms. Rome was gone, yet its specter loomed large over these tribes and their leaders, who spoke forms of Latin (albeit increasingly barbaric versions of it), believed in the Christian faith, and dreamed of the title of Roman Emperor.



Map 6.13 | Map of the Roman Empire in 477 CE

Author: Thomas Lessman

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