



Learning Resource

The Roman World from 753 BCE to 500 CE

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	The Late Republic
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

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 also uniformly male, predominantly aristocratic, and famed for their 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 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—Felicity had given birth in prison mere hours before her execution—by 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 new cultural heroes. But far from repelling others from imitating their examples, these stories encouraged the rise of more willing martyrs. Due to the spread of Christianity, the Roman heroes of Late Antiquity were a far cry from Cincinnatus. Rather than aristocratic generals and politicians, these heroes 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.



Cincinnatus left his plow and his home to accept dictatorship of Rome.

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The story of the Roman world from the foundation of the city of Rome to the fall of the Roman Empire in the West is, overall, a tale of two different transformations. The first is the dramatic transformation in cultural values and beliefs, a glimpse of which is reflected in the stories above. The second is a dramatic geographical transformation, which also brought about culture clashes and a variety of changes throughout the entire Mediterranean world and beyond. This was the transformation of a small village on the Tiber River into one of the largest empires in all of world history. After part of that empire collapsed, from its ashes grew the region we now know as Europe.

Questions to Guide Your Reading

1. In what ways did the geography and topography of Rome and the Roman Empire affect 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 those 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 of information 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?

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

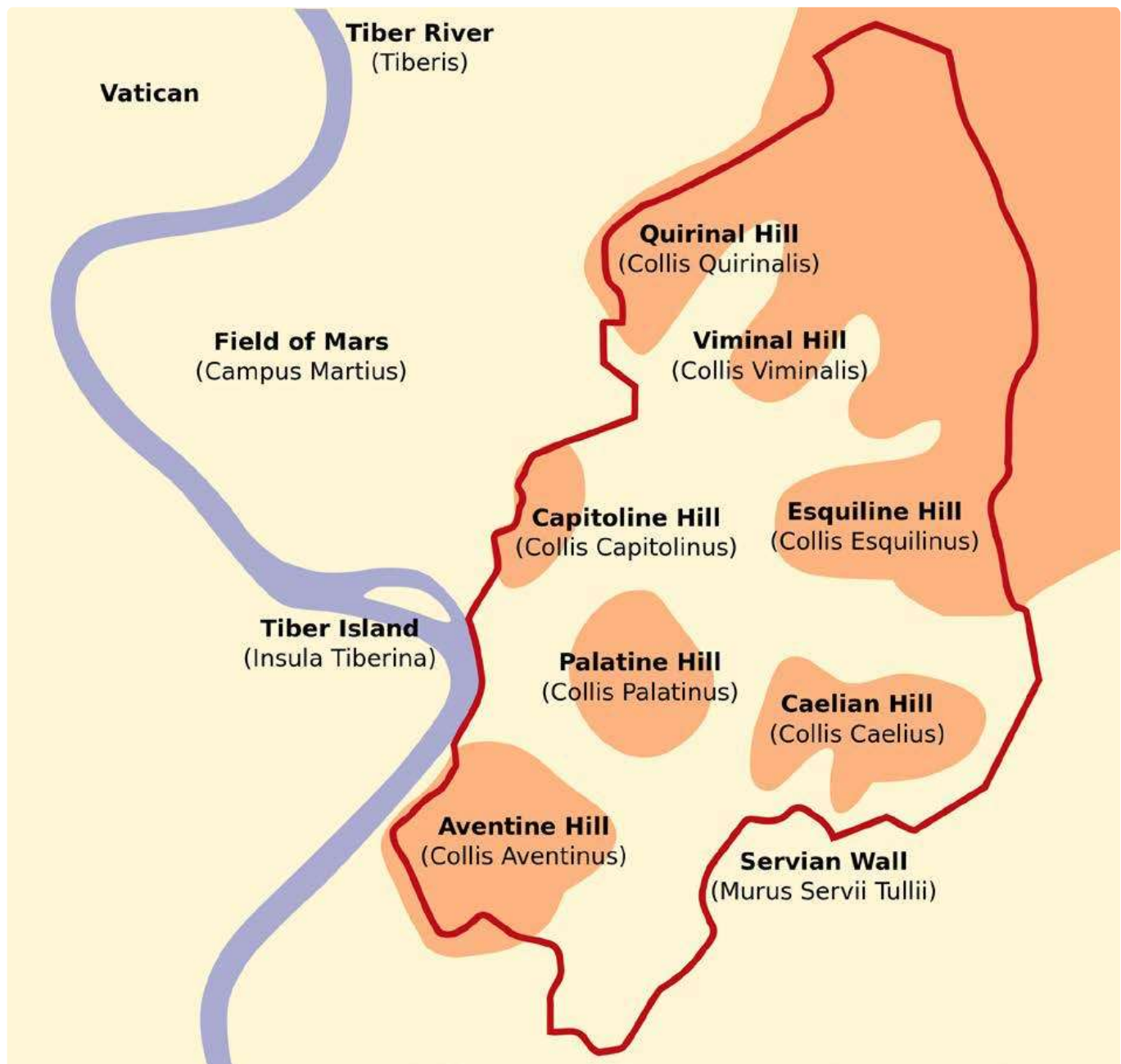
- Pompeii
- Pompey
- *Populares*
- Praetor
- Proscriptions
- Punic Wars
- Pyrrhus
- Quaestor
- *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*
- Roman Empire (period)
- Roman Republic (period)
- Rome
- Romulus and Remus
- Romulus Augustulus
- Samnite Wars
- Senate
- Social War
- Suetonius
- Sulla
- Tacitus
- Tarquin the Proud
- 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)

Geography and Topography of Rome and the Roman Empire

Roman history is, in a nutshell, the story of Rome's transformation from village to empire. 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 that would further shape 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, provided the ability to trade with neighboring city-states.



A map of ancient Rome indicates the locations of its seven hills.

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By the mid-Republic, requiring access to the sea, the Romans built a harbor at **Ostia**, which grew to become the full-fledged commercial arm of the city. Rome became crowded. Wheeled vehicles were prohibited inside the city during the day to protect heavy pedestrian traffic. At night, carts from Ostia poured into the city, delivering food and other goods 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, the city was never taken 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, it had earned the nickname **Magna Graecia** (“Great Greece”). Several smaller tribes also hemmed in the early Romans, including the Latins, the Aequi, and the Sabines.

The topography of Rome—which provided the advantages of its hills and river—likely was a boon in the city’s struggles against 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. The most famous example of an invasion from the north, that of **Hannibal** during the Second Punic War, is a case in point. When Hannibal selected the difficult route through the Alps to surprise the Romans, it proved more destructive to his forces than he had anticipated.



Map of Italy, 400 BCE

In Rome's early history, it was surrounded by many more powerful neighbors.

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As Rome built a Mediterranean empire, the city itself also continued to grow, 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. Subsequently, Roman emperors were especially cautious to limit access to Egypt to prominent senators and other politicians, for fear of losing control over this vital area of the empire. During the rule of the **Emperor Trajan** in the early second century CE, the Roman Empire attained its largest geographic footprint, stretching to Britain in the west, to slightly beyond the Rhine and Danube river in the north, and including much of the Near East and North Africa.



Map of the Roman Empire at its greatest extent, 117 CE

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Topography also played a role in the Romans' ultimately unsuccessful struggle to retain all of its territories after Trajan's death. The natural frontier provided by the **Rhine and Danube rivers** made it difficult for the Romans to maintain control of the territories on the other side of those waterways. A lack of natural borders could also be problematic. Struggling to repel the warrior tribes in northern Britain, two second-century CE emperors—**Hadrian**, and later, **Antoninus Pius**—built successive walls in an attempt to separate un-Romanized tribes from the territories under Roman control.

Another persisting challenge was 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. But once the empire encompassed the Mediterranean and far beyond, Rome could be a great distance from persistently problematic frontiers.

Subsequently, emperors in the second and third centuries spent increasingly less time in the capital. When **Diocletian** split the Roman Empire in 293 CE into four administrative regions, each with a regional capital, Rome was left out. And in 330 CE, the emperor **Constantine** permanently moved the capital of the Roman Empire to his new city of **Constantinople** at the site of the former Greek city of **Byzantium**.

The large area the Roman Empire would grow to encompass 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 its periphery, providing the means for armies, politicians, traders, tourists, and students to travel with more security and speed than ever before, although travel was never a fully safe undertaking. Bandits often lurked on roads and greedy locals were always eager to fleece unsuspecting tourists. Pirates regularly trolled the seas, and shipwrecks were an unfortunately common reality. Still, the Roman Empire created an unprecedented degree of transportation networks that allowed anyone in one part of the empire to be able to travel to any other part, provided that person was wealthy enough to afford the journey.

Chronology 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 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).

As the writings of the Roman historian **Tacitus** testify, as early as the late first century CE, Romans themselves thought of their history in terms of those two periods. The basic difference is quite simple. During the the Republic, Rome was ruled by a Republican government that distributed power, in theory, among all Roman citizens. In practice, it was an **aristocratic oligarchy**. Under the Empire, Rome was under one ruler, the Emperor.

Recent research, however, has challenged this interpretation of Roman history as over-simplified. Historian Harriet Flower has argued that the Roman Republic is best perceived as a series of republics, each with distinct features. Scholar Peter Brown has challenged the myth

of the “decline and fall” of the Roman Empire, first popularized by nineteenth-century British historian Edward Gibbon. Brown has argued that, as a result of the Christianization of the Roman world, Roman culture in the Late Empire continued to flourish, although it was quite different from earlier periods.

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

Sources of Roman History

One of the greatest challenges to modern historians of Rome is the Romans’ own seeming lack of interest in writing the history of their civilization’s first 600 years. According to Roman legend, Rome was founded in 753 BCE. But the first Roman history written in the Latin language, *Origins*, authored by the Republican politician **Cato the Elder**, was not published until 149 BCE.

A few senators had written about Roman history in the Greek language before that, and some aristocrats kept family histories, but Cato’s work was the first to recount the history of Rome on a large scale, recording events from the foundation of the city to Cato’s own death. Today, only fragments of Cato’s history survive, and they reveal that Cato’s approach to recording history was unusual. Rather than referring to the principal individuals in Roman history by name, Cato referred to them by title or political position. Subsequently, his history glorifies the accomplishments of Rome rather than those of individual Romans.

Thankfully for modern historians, Cato’s experiment with nameless history did not catch on with subsequent Roman historians. Today’s scholars can reconstruct the story of the Romans from a variety of written and archaeological sources, although some are not unproblematic, and there is little evidence of some periods.

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 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 aristocratic families.

As the title of his work indicates, Livy began his work describing the legends about the founding of Rome. He continued his narrative until to his own time during the age of **Augustus**. The last known events in his work cover the year 9 BCE. Although Livy’s work

consisted of **142 books**, only about a quarter survives. These include the first ten books, which cover the regal period, the early Republic, and the first two Punic Wars.

Other prominent historians of the Roman Republic whose works survived 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 50s BCE, and the ***Civil War***, about his engagement against Pompey in 49 – 45 BCE.

Contemporary Histories of the Roman Empire

The works of two prominent historians survive from 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. ***The Annals*** recount the rule of the emperors Tiberius through Nero, while the ***Histories*** continue the narrative to the rule of the emperor Domitian. Significant portions of both works survive. **Ammianus Marcellinus**, a military officer who wrote in the late fourth century CE, perceived himself as continuing the work of Tacitus. Ammianus composed a massive history of the Roman Empire that picks up from the end of Tacitus' work and continues 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 anonymously published ***Historia Augusta***, composed some time in the late Empire, provides similarly sensationalized 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 also survive. In the late first century BCE, **Diodorus of Sicily** wrote a massive universal history that includes key events of Roman history, along with Greek history and mythology. The Greek biographer **Plutarch**, writing in the first century CE, paired for the sake of comparison the biographies of famous Greeks and Romans; one exemplary such pairing is that of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. And **Josephus**, a Jewish rebel leader turned Roman citizen, wrote the ***Jewish War***, a detailed account of the disastrous Jewish revolt against Rome in the 60s CE.

But these works of history represent 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, and others. For example, one of the best sources for learning about the political ideology of the Augustan age is **Virgil's** epic poem, ***Aeneid***, which tells the story of the Trojan hero **Aeneas** and his struggle to reach Italy and found Rome after the fall of Troy.

Arguably the single best source for everyday life in the Roman provinces under the empire is **Apuleius'** novel ***Metamorphoses***, better known by the title, *Golden Ass*. The novel is a fictional account of a man accidentally turned into a donkey who tells the story of his travels throughout the Roman Empire in the late second century CE. A particularly valuable source for an explanation of the government of the Roman provinces is the correspondence between **Pliny the Younger**, the governor of the province of Bithynia (a settlement on the shores of the Black Sea in 111 – 113 CE) and the emperor **Trajan**. Such letters reveal that the job of a provincial governor was a decidedly unglamorous one.

Religious Sources

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 contains narratives from early Christians about their faith and its spread throughout the Roman Empire. A variety of popular heretical texts from the second and third centuries also survive and allow historians to reconstruct some of the dissenting views 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 ultimately resulted in the **Nicene Creed**. Starting in the second century CE, accounts of saints' lives and their martyrdoms provided semi-fictional and stylized biographies of individual believers.

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***, which recounts the story of Christianity from its origins to Eusebius's present. In the early fifth century CE, **Augustine**, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, wrote ***City of God***, a massive work narrating the history and legends of Rome from its beginnings to Augustine's day. This was done in an attempt to prove that Rome's previous successes were due not to adherence to the pagan gods, but rather to the Christian God's mercy.

In addition to written sources, archaeological sources provide further insight into Roman life during different historical periods. Some examples that survive include inscriptions, particularly on 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.



A reconstruction 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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One example of the random nature of how some sources were able to survive is the ancient site of **Pompeii**. The eruption of the volcano **Vesuvius** in 79 CE caused ash to rain down on the resort Roman town of Pompeii and the nearby town of Herculaneum, effectively burying both towns and preserving them for modern archaeologists. The tragedy for the Roman residents of the two towns ultimately proved to be a modern archaeologist's dream.



The largely intact ruins of Pompeii are shown from above, with Vesuvius pictured in the background.

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While an abundance of different sources survive from different periods of Roman history, some perspectives are difficult to reconstruct. For example, slaves in the Roman world are as archaeologically invisible as they are in the Greek world. Likewise, little evidence documents women's lives before the rise of Christianity, and their voices are largely omitted 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 Roman aristocracy. Still, the careful historian can gain at least some insight into these lesser-documented perspectives by gathering references to them in the sources that do survive.

The Early and Middle Roman 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 saw the expansion of Rome from a simple village on the Tiber to an enormous pan-Mediterranean empire.



The stages of early Roman expansion, 500 BCE to 218 BCE

Author: User "Javierfv1212." Source: Wikimedia Commons. License: Public Domain

The story of the rapid growth of the Roman Empire was as fascinating to contemporary Romans as it was to 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 his prologue to ***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 subsequently proposed that part of the reason for the Romans' success was their adoption of its republican government as replacement for their original monarchy. Polybius became increasingly convinced during his stay in Rome that the Roman government was superior to all others in the Mediterranean.

From Monarchy to Republic: Roman 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 that later Romans held about their history are important to consider, since whether they are grounded in reality or not, those beliefs helped determine the subsequent decisions of Roman leaders. This is especially true of the Roman 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. The story also gave them a prominent place in the Greek heroic epic, Homer's *Iliad*.

When the Romans later embarked on their conquest of Greece, they could claim that they were 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.



This statue shows a she-wolf nursing Romulus and Remus, the twin sons of the war god Mars and descendants of the Trojan hero Aeneas. Romulus would go on to found Rome and slay his brother for insulting the city.

Author: User "Nyenec." Source: Wikimedia Commons. License: Public Domain

But while Romulus was in the process of founding Rome, Remus insulted the new city, and his brother killed him to avenge its honor. Later, after Romulus and his soldiers completed building the city, he realized its lack of female inhabitants posed a problem, so Rome's founder and his supporters raided a neighboring tribe, the Sabines, and kidnapped their women.

It is telling that later Romans believed their city was founded on fraternal bloodshed, kidnapping, and rape. The stories of Romulus' accomplishments, while not laudatory, demonstrate an important Roman belief: preserving the greatness of Rome sometimes required morally reprehensible actions. Rome always came first. If the welfare of the city required the sacrifice of one's brother, or the use of force against others, the gods would remain on the side of the Romans and condone those actions as necessary.

Romans believed that their city was ruled by seven different kings in succession before the founding of the Republic. 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, **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, according to Roman legend, two consuls were immediately elected to govern the newly formed republic.

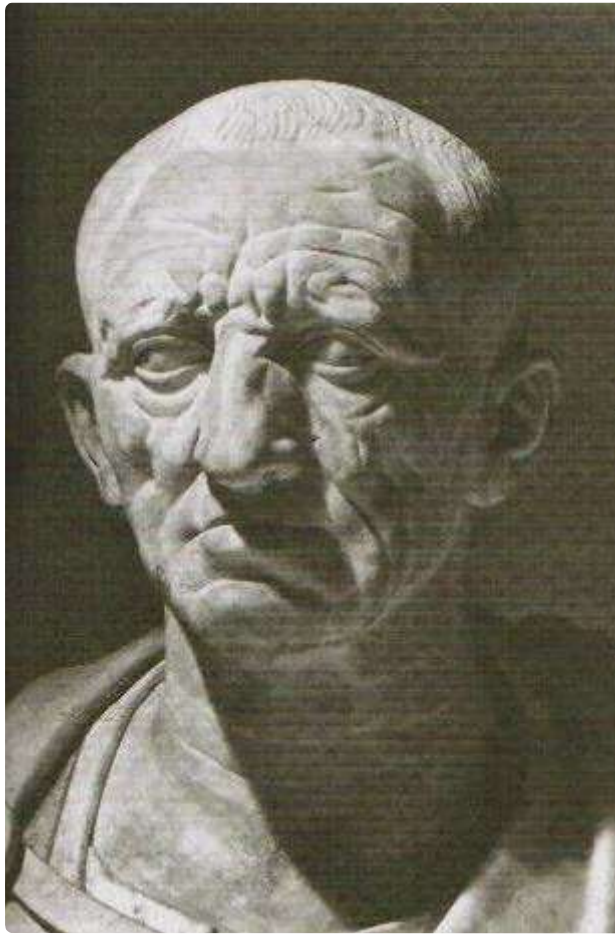
The reality is likely to have been more complicated. Assuming there were indeed seven kings who ruled the city before the Republic was established, and assuming that the last of them was driven out by an aristocratic revolution, it appears that a period of transition ensued as the Romans experimented with a variety of short-term solutions before arriving at the model of the republican government with which we are familiar. It seems more likely that the actual stimulus for the republic's formation was the plebeians' growing dissatisfaction with their exclusion from the political process. The **plebeians** were Rome's lower socio-economic group, and they composed the majority of the city.

The Early Republic: the Conflict of Orders, the Twelve Tables, and Key Legislation

Roman sources from all periods, beginning in the early Republic, reveal common values that all Romans held dear and considered foundational to 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 of their ancestors. Ancestral custom, which had first made Rome great, had to be respected, and reformers, such as the emperor **Augustus**, managed to frame his reforms as a return to something old, rather than as something new.

Three other values key to understanding Roman culture are ***auctoritas*** (power or authority), ***dignitas*** (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*** conveyed on individuals 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 they reflected one's bearing and behavior as a true Roman. Jocularly was not valued. Rather, seriousness was a particularly revered aspect of Roman conduct and determination. It is striking that Romans never smiled in portraits. Their austere facial expressions conveyed their power and superiority over those whom they had conquered.



Bust of an austere Roman, possibly Cato the Elder

Author: User "Shakko." Source: Wikimedia Commons.
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While they shared common values, Romans were also deeply aware of social divisions among them. From Rome's founding, its 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 the annual election of top political officers.

During the early Republic, following the expulsion of the kings, the two orders were at odds, as patricians tried to establish a government that reserved all political power for themselves, and the plebeians fought for the opportunity to hold political and religious offices. Although they did not wield any political power at first, the plebeians discovered in the early fifth century that their most powerful weapon was to threaten **secession** from the city unless the

patricians acquiesced to their demands. While much about the **Republican 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 legislation that the Romans passed at the time.

In 494 BCE, following the first plebeian secession, the Roman Senate allowed the plebeians to elect plebeian tribunes. An office that was eventually reserved for senators, it was originally an opportunity for plebeians to elect officers to the Plebeian Council to advocate for them. Plebeians next appear to have advocated for a public display of the laws 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 law was a ban on intermarriage between plebeians and patricians, showing a clear commitment on the part of 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 ultimately intermarried 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 one of the two consuls elected each year to be plebeian. The phrasing of the law was significant, as it allowed for the possibility of both consuls elected in a single year to be plebeian, although that did not happen until 215 BCE. The legislation that modern historians consider to have ended the early Republican Conflict of the Orders is the **Lex Hortensia** of 287 BCE, which made all legislation 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, they can see the gradual weakening of the patricians along with the growing influence of the plebeians on Roman law. 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.

***Cursus Honorum* and the Path to Political Power**

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* often stood in his path. The system dictated that all political offices were to be held for a one-year term, and, to prevent any one individual from amassing too much power, candidates had to wait ten years before running for a second consulship. Each office also had a **minimum age requirement**, albeit with a special privilege for patricians, who could 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 a decade of distinguished service, candidates who were at least thirty years old were permitted to run for the first office in the *cursus*: the **quaestorship**. The number of quaestors installed each year rose over time to twenty people by the late Republic. Each quaestor was assigned to a specific duty during his year in office, which varied from supervising coin minting in Rome to serving as an assistant to a provincial governor or a consul in charge of a war.

Although positions in the **plebeian tribune** were not officially part of the required *cursus honorum*, most plebeian ex-quaestors ran for that office. Ten plebeian tribunes were elected each year and were appointed to advocate for the benefit of the plebeians during senatorial debates. **Aediles** could also be elected to a plebeian tribune. “Aedile”—a term derived from the Latin “aedes,” meaning “building” or “temple”—were in charge of public building projects and often sponsored public entertainment.

The next step in the *cursus* was the **praetorship**. Similar to the quaestors, the number of elected praetors grew over time, until there were eight in the late Republic. Praetors could hold **imperium**, the right to command an army. Thus, they often served in military roles or in an administrative capacity by governing a province. Each year, one praetor—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 were qualified to run for a one-year consulship. Two **consuls** were elected annually, and the office was the pinnacle of a Roman political career. Aristocratic families would for centuries keep on display in their homes the ancestor masks of relatives who had served as consuls. But the rule of a consul was intentionally short. Since the law required that ten years elapse between successive consulships, very few individuals ever held the office more than once, until several politicians in the late Republic broke the rules altogether. Finally, one additional office for which ex-consuls could run was that of a censor. Every five years, two **censors** were elected for a period of eighteen months to conduct a citizen census.

While this structure of annually elected offices was designed to prevent any one individual from assuming all of the state’s political power, the Senate also realized that, on rare occasions, concentrating all power in one set of hands was necessary. 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 previously mentioned case of Cincinnatus.

The *cursus honorum* is best visualized as a pyramid with a wide base and narrowing steps on the way up. While twenty men each year were elected to a quaestorship, only a fraction of them would ever achieve a praetorship, and a smaller fraction would rise to a consulship. Still,

election to the quaestorship secured lifelong membership in the **Senate**, a governing body of roughly 300 politicians—which doubled in size to 600 in the first century BCE—who effectively governed Rome under the Republic. The reason some men politically advanced while others never made it past the quaestorship appears to surpass the political world and cross into the realm of religion.

Religion and Politics

As in the Greek religious tradition, Roman beliefs were traditionally polytheistic, with many myths and gods aligned to their Greek counterparts. Zeus, the Greek king of the gods, became Jupiter—a patron god of Rome under the title **Jupiter Optimus Maximus**, or “Jupiter the Best and the Greatest.”



The Capitoline Triad

A marble carving depicts 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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Zeus' consort, Hera, became the Roman goddess **Juno**, the patron of marriage. The Greek Athena became the Roman **Minerva**, the patron divinity of women's crafts. Both **Venus**, the goddess of love, and **Mars**, the god of war, had mythical family connections to Rome's human

founders. There were countless other divinities; 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, making vows to them and promising gifts if the gods fulfilled their requests, Roman religion also had a significant public component reserved for the priestly colleges. Although not limited to politicians, membership in these colleges was at times key to political advancement. One example is the career trajectory 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 religious expression had the same goal: keeping the **pax deorum**, that is, maintaining peace with the gods, on which the success of the state depended. As long as Romans maintained a respectful peace with their gods, their deities ensured Rome's success. If a disaster befell the state, Romans typically assumed that the pax deorum had been violated in some way. The gods then had to be appeased to end the disaster and prevent similar events from occurring in the future.

Rome's Campaign of Expansion

While legends about the Roman kings suggest they had significant military responsibilities, it appears that their military actions were largely defensive. But shortly after 500 BCE, just a decade after the expulsion of the kings, Roman expansion began in earnest.

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 likely originally signified the end of the campaign season.

Similar to the Greeks, the Romans had minimum wealth requirements for military service, as soldiers were expected to supply their own equipment. In early Republican military history, Rome repeatedly engaged the same enemies, as in the three **Samnite Wars**, the three **Punic Wars**, and the four **Macedonian Wars**. This suggests that, for whatever reason, the Romans did not aim to annihilate their opponents unless absolutely pressed to do so.

Roman expansion in the 490s BCE seems to have begun 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 Rome. Tarquin led the group in an attack on the Romans that became known as the **Battle of Lake Regillus**. The conflict resulted

in a decisive victory for Rome. The Romans signed an uneasy peace treaty with the Latins, but war broke out again from 340 – 338 BCE. The Roman victory this time resulted in the absorption of the Latin city-states into Rome as partial citizens.

The Etruscan War

The Latins were not the only enemies the nascent Roman Republic had to face. Romans also 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 recounted by **Livy** states that Romans were only able to conquer Veii after they performed the ceremony of **evocation**, or “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 by promising her a nice new temple in Rome if she would switch sides.

According to Livy, the city then fell to the Romans. When the Roman soldiers were removing a statue of Juno from her temple in Veii for transportation to Rome, a 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 protected them and guided them to success.



Two Roman infantrymen and a cavalryman, second century BCE

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The Samnite Wars

While still fighting the Latins, the Romans embarked on what grew 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. At some point during the Samnite Wars, it appears the Romans changed their mode of fighting from the Greek hoplite phalanx formation to a system of their own—the **manipular legion**.

This new system apparently allowed more flexibility in the arrangement of troops on the battlefield. It enabled the use of both heavy and light infantry as needed rather than maintaining soldiers in a static formation for the duration of a battle. 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.

The Roman Empire Confronts Greece

It is striking to consider that the Romans spent eighty 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. But nevertheless, in 280 – 275 BCE, Rome became embroiled in a war with **Pyrrhus**—the 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 in their third battle against him in 275 BCE, demonstrating the superiority of the new Roman manipular legion even against the phalanx of the Macedonians, who were the 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 ensured potentially conflicting spheres of interest, providing cause for continual 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 and Corinth in 146 BCE, the eventual victory of the Romans over both powers allowed them to gain full control over Carthage and Corinth and all of their land holdings. Their victory effectively put the entire Mediterranean world under Roman rule.

Rome's Mediterranean Empire

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 the internal stability of Rome proper. A critical question 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 that ruled Rome was expanded, with minor variations, into the empire.



Roman provinces in the late First Century BCE and Early First Century CE

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The new availability of governorships made 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 ongoing, which posed the potential for military glory. Also attractive were wealthy provinces, with their potential for private enrichment.

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.

But the historian **Sallust** saw in the Roman victory in the Punic Wars 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. The abundance of resources that flowed into the empire following the victories over Carthage raised the question of how to distribute this new wealth and land.

Disagreements over this question dominated the politics of the late Republic, creating two new political factions: the **Populares**—those who protected the interests of the people—and the **Optimates**—those who protected the interests of who they considered the best element of the populace, namely, themselves.

Political Violence and the Beginning of the End of the Roman Republic

Political violence was minimal in the Roman Republic until 133 BCE. If the legends are true, even the expulsion of the kings in 510 BCE was a bloodless event. But starting in 133 BCE, 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 **Cornelii 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 such land redistribution would benefit the state, since land ownership was a prerequisite 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 resulted in escalating conflict between Gracchus and the rest of the Senate. At one Senate meeting, the pontifex maximus—who was Tiberius Gracchus' own cousin, **Publius Cornelius Scipio Nasica**—argued that Gracchus had attempted to make himself king, and he had to be stopped. Since weapons were banned inside the Senate building, enraged Senators grabbed whatever was at hand, including chairs 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 122 BCE.

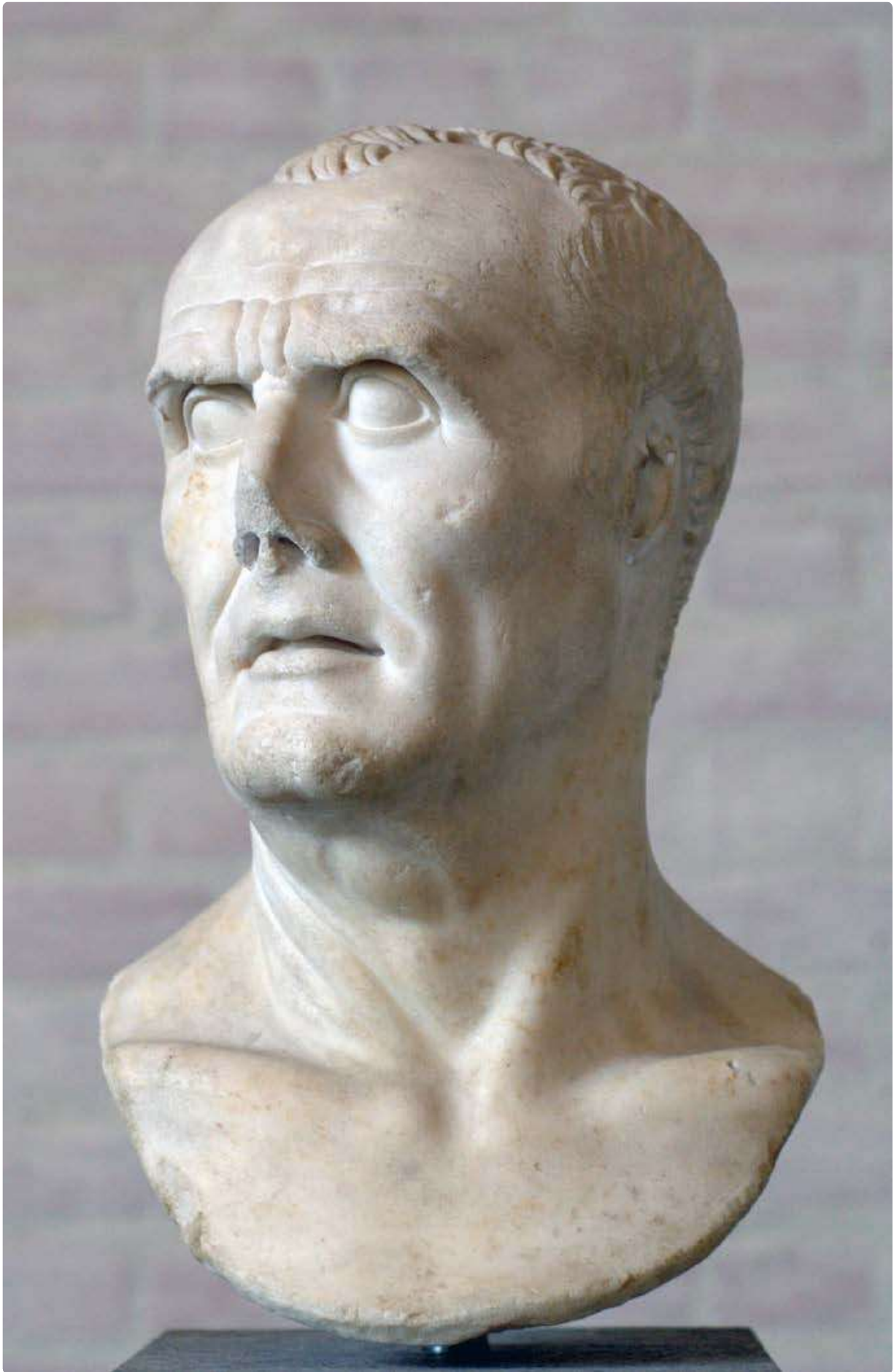
Gaius Gracchus' revived agrarian reform proposal was even more ambitious than his brother's. Especially controversial was Gaius Gracchus' proposal to grant full Roman citizenship to Rome's Italian allies. Alarmed at Gaius Gracchus' popularity with the people, in 121 BCE, the consul **Lucius Opimius** proposed a new measure in the Senate: a **senatus consultum ultimum**, or "final decree," which amounted to allowing the consuls to do whatever 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 his legacy during the remainder of the history of the Roman Republic cannot be underestimated. The laws proposed by the Gracchus brothers (or “Gracchi”) demonstrated the growing conflict between the rich and the poor in the Roman state. The willingness on the part of prominent Senators to resort to violence to resolve such matters set a dangerous precedent for the remainder of the Republic, fundamentally changing the nature of Roman politics.

The support that the Gracchi received from the Roman people, as well as from the residents of the Italian cities who were not full citizens, illustrated that the issues raised by the Gracchi were not going to go away after their deaths. Indeed, Rome’s Italian allies declared war against Rome in 90 – 88 BCE. The result of this **Social War** (after “socii,” meaning “allies”) was to grant full Roman citizenship rights to Italians.

Marius and Sulla and the Struggle for Roman Leadership

The affair of the Gracchi was the first clear instance of a violent conflict in the struggle between the Populares and the Optimates. 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**.



Bust of Gaius Marius

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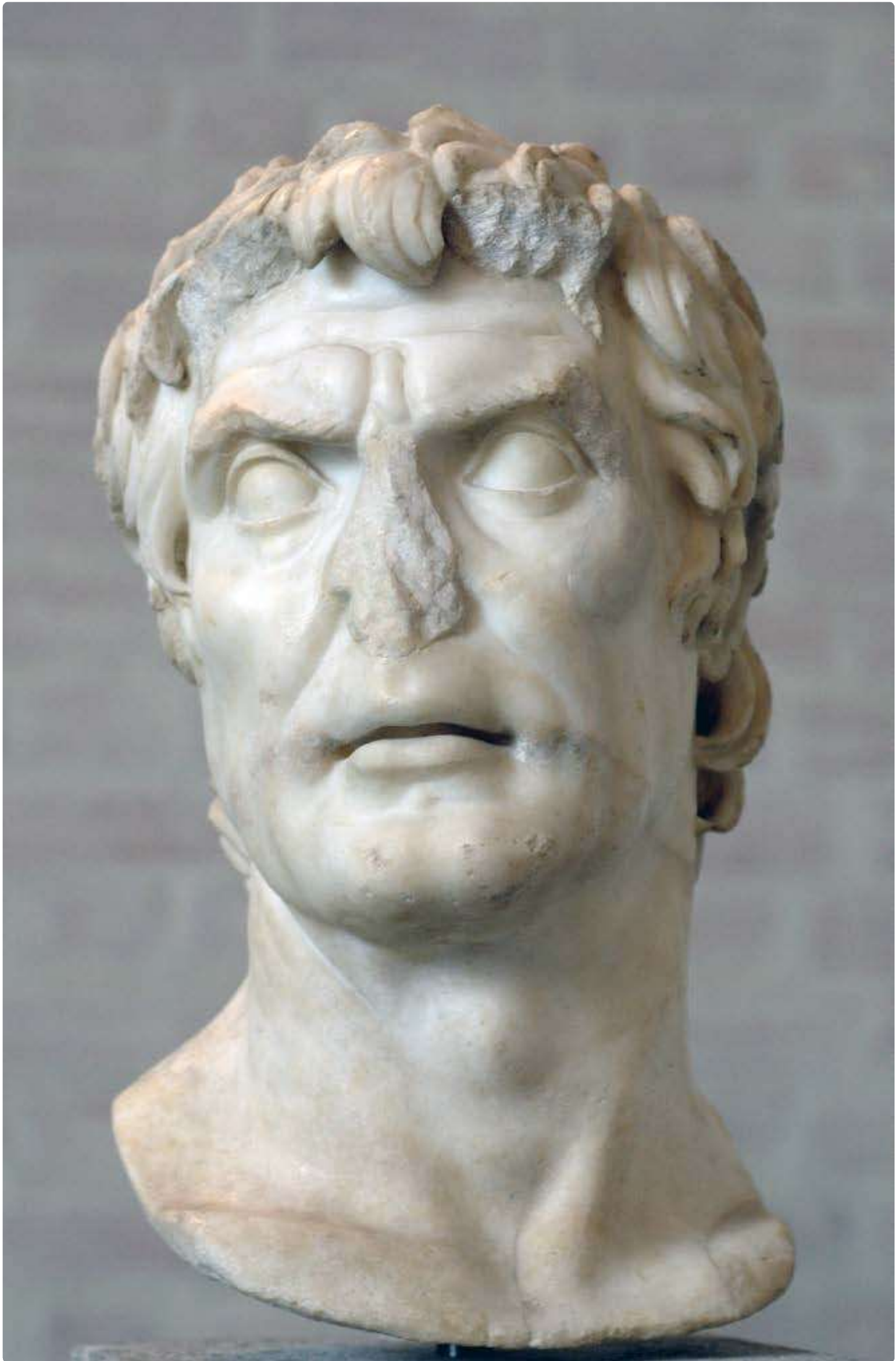
While Marius had already enjoyed a distinguished military career, he was a *novus homo*, or "new man," a term the Romans used to refer to newcomers to Roman politics. The phrase referred to individuals who did not have family members previously elected to political office. Marius was not even from Rome proper, but rather from **Arpinum**, a town located sixty miles south of Rome. Marius benefited from the sense of frustration in Rome about the length of the war and the perceived corruption of aristocratic leaders abroad. Once elected, he took over command of the war and passed the most comprehensive reforms of the Roman military since the Romans switched to the manipular legion of battle.

First, Marius abolished the property requirement for military service, thus allowing landless Romans to serve in the army for the first time in Roman history. The Roman state also made a commitment to arm its troops and reimburse them for their service. Henceforth, military service became a profession rather than a seasonal occupation for farmers. Finally, Marius changed the tactics of the legionary organization on the battlefield from maniples into a **legion of cohorts**.

While controversial, Marius' reforms also proved immensely successful, and he was able to quickly defeat **Jugurtha**, ending Rome's war with **Numidia** in 104 BCE. Marius' victories earned him unprecedented popularity in Rome, and he was elected to five more successive consulships between 104 – 100 BCE. This, of course, violated the Roman law that required a period of ten years between successive consulships. But Marius' popularity and military success, combined with the Romans' fear of ongoing foreign wars, elevated him above the law. But Marius, who had begun his military career fighting for Rome, was to exit the political sphere after causing the worst civil war Rome had yet seen.

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 command of 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, summoned the Plebeian Council and overturned the Senate's decision, driving Sulla out of Rome. But Sulla fought back, assembling an army and marching on Rome. After Sulla and his forces took the city, he had himself declared commander of the war on Mithridates and departed for the Black Sea. Marius remained, and in 86 BCE, he again was elected consul for the seventh and final time. Just seventeen days after taking office, Marius died of natural causes. But the civil war he started with Sulla was far from over.



Bust of Lucius Cornelius Sulla

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The Civil Struggle for Roman Political Power Intensifies

In 83 BCE, victorious over Mithridates but facing a hostile reception from the Senate, **Sulla** marched on Rome for the second time. Declaring himself **dictator**, Sulla ruled Rome for the next three years. His reforms aimed to prevent the rise of another challenger like Marius, so they significantly curtailed the powers of the plebeian tribunes.

In addition, Sulla established the **proscriptions**—a list of enemies of the state who anyone could legally kill on sight, and whose property could be confiscated. One name on Sulla's list was that of 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 strapped financially and in debt for the rest of his life.

After enacting his reforms, Sulla resigned from politics in 79 BCE, retiring to his family estate outside of Rome, where he appears to have drunk himself into an early grave. During 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 reverted to its former state. The republic after Sulla was a different one than the one that had thrived before.

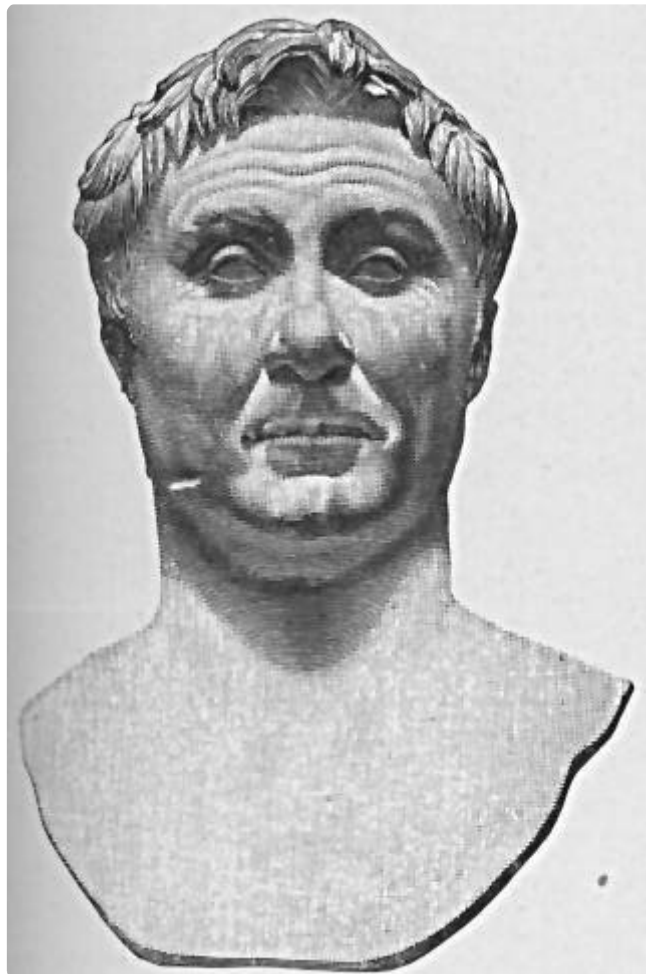
The civil war between Marius and Sulla demonstrated the increasing degree of political competition in the republic as well as the lengths to which some Roman politicians were willing to go to obtain and hold power. It also demonstrated a dangerous side effect of Marius' military reforms. Before Marius, 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 them, as much as or more than to the Roman state.

Marius' remarkable political success—including his election to a record-setting and law-breaking seven consulships over the course of his life—was evidence 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 newcomers to Roman politics such as Marius. This challenge by newcomers to the old Roman political families was for some an especially bitter pill to swallow.

In 63 BCE, **Lucius Sergius Catilina**, a patrician whose bid for consulship was defeated by another newcomer from Arpinum, **Marcus Tullius Cicero**, joined other frustrated Senators in a plan to assassinate the consuls and take over the state. Catilina's conspiracy failed, however, as described in Cicero's reports to the Senate and the people about how he discovered and stopped the conspiracy.

Catilina's frustration, just like that of Sulla's twenty years earlier, demonstrates how difficult it was for Roman's "old-school" political families to accept that their competition for the consulship now was not only against one another. Catilina's plan to resort to violence to achieve power also shows just how quickly political violence had become a potentially viable solution to problems in Roman Republican politics after the Gracchi.

The First Triumvirate, the Civil War, and the Rise of Caesar



Pompey the Great with Alexander the Great's Hairstyle

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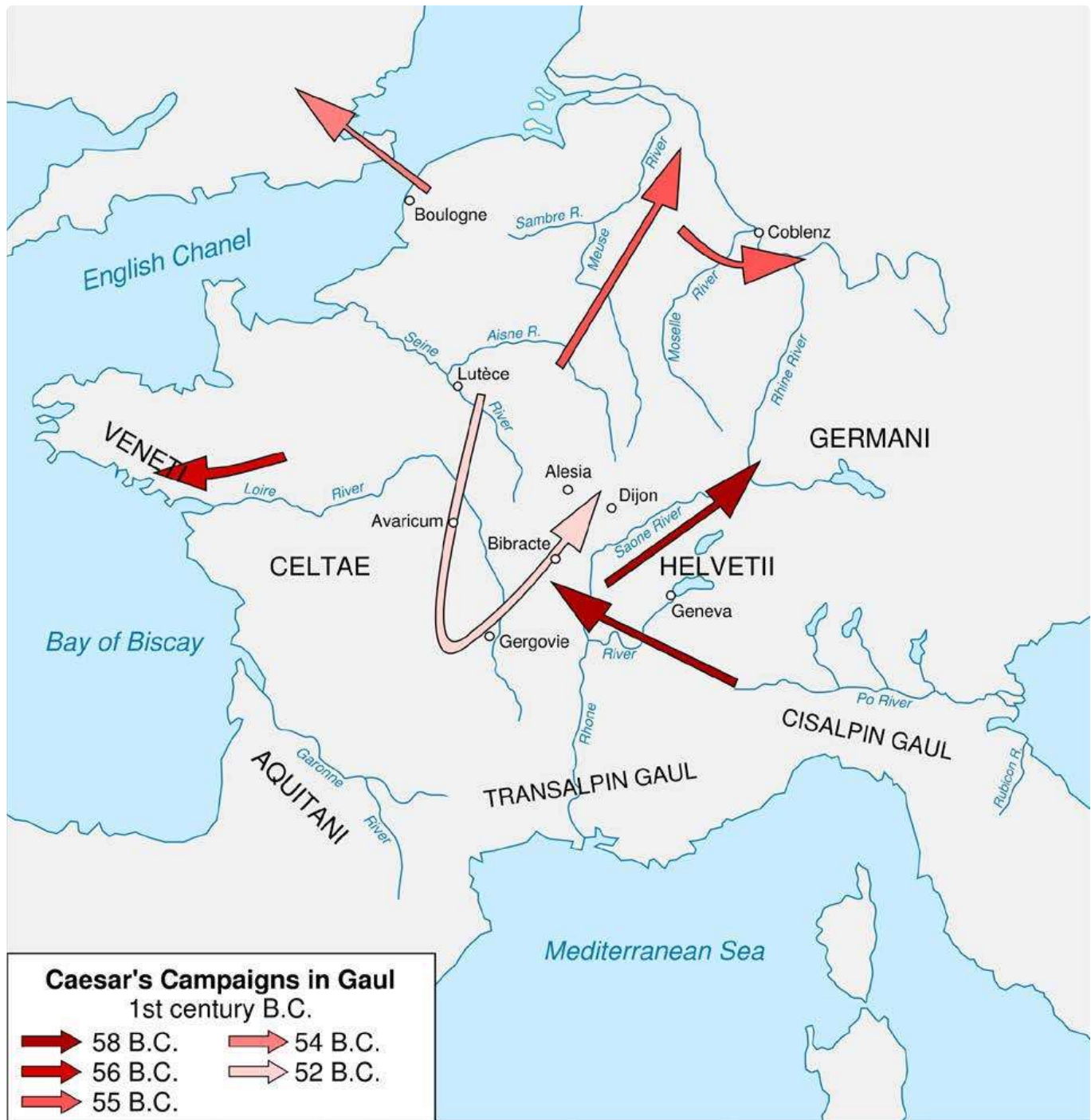
In 60 BCE, three politicians joined forces and created an alliance to benefit all of their political fortunes. The first man, **Marcus Licinius Crassus** was the wealthiest man in Rome, the son of a consul, and consul himself in 70 BCE. His colleague in his consulship, **Gnaeus Pompey**, achieved military fame in his youth, earning him the nickname “Magnus,” or “the Great,” from Sulla himself.

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

The alliance paid immediate dividends for Caesar, who was promptly elected consul in 59 BCE and then was awarded **Gaul** as his province for five years after the consulship. Crassus and Pompey were re-elected consuls in 55 BCE, and, in that same year, Caesar’s command in Gaul was renewed for another five years.

A talented writer and a skilled general, Caesar published an account of his Gallic campaigns in installments during his time in Gaul. This made Romans continually aware of Caesar’s successes, and his popularity grew in his absence—a source of frustration for the other two triumvirs. The already-uneasy triumvirate disintegrated in 53 BCE. In that year, Julia died in childbirth, and her baby died with her. Crassus was killed at the Battle of Carrhae as he fought the Parthians. With both Julia and Crassus gone, no links remained between Caesar and Pompey, who quickly became enemies.

Late in 50 BCE, the Senate, under Pompey’s leadership, informed Caesar that his command had expired and demanded that he surrender his army. But Caesar refused to return to Rome a private citizen, demanding he be allowed to stand for the consulship in absentia. When his request was denied, on January 10, 49 BCE, Caesar and his army crossed the **Rubicon**, a river that 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 by Roman law. The **civil war** had begun.



Caesar's campaigns in Gaul during Rome's Civil War

Author: User "historicaire." Source: Wikimedia Commons. License: CC BY-SA 3.0

Although most of the Senate was on Pompey's side, Caesar started the war with a distinct advantage: his troops had just spent the larger part of a decade fighting with him in Gaul, while much of Pompey's army was disorganized. As a result, for much of 49 BCE, Pompey retreated to the south of Italy, with Caesar in pursuit. 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 his defeat, Pompey fled to Egypt, where he was assassinated by order of **Ptolemy XIII**, who had hoped to win Caesar's favor by this action. When he arrived in Egypt in pursuit of Pompey, however, Caesar sided with Ptolemy's sister, **Cleopatra VII**, and appears to have fathered a son with her—**Caesarion**.



Bust of Cleopatra VII

Author: User "Louis le Grand." Source: Wikimedia Commons. License: Public Domain

The Death of Caesar and the Age of Augustus

Victorious in the civil war against Pompey and his supporters, Caesar was faced with the 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 chose the first model, holding the consulship first with a colleague in 47 BCE and 46 BCE, and 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 44 BCE, he took the title of **dictator perpetuo**, or “dictator for life,” and he had coins minted with his likeness and new title.



Coin of Caesar from 44 BCE

Note Caesar's Image on One Side, and Venus on the reverse.

Author: User "Medium69" Source: Wikimedia Commons License: CC BY-SA 3.0

Caesar's self-appointed title appears to have been the final straw for a group of about sixty senators who feared that he aimed to crown himself king. On the **Ides of March** (March 15) of 44 BCE, the conspirators rushed Caesar during a Senate meeting and stabbed him to death. But if his murderers thought that by assassinating Caesar they were going to restore the republic, they were 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 a legitimate son who could inherit his estate—Caesarion, his son with Cleopatra, was illegitimate—he adopted an heir in his will, a common Roman practice.

That heir was his grand-nephew Gaius Octavius, whose name after the adoption became **Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus** (or “Octavian”). Caesar’s will also named an alternate heir, should his main heir die before he could inherit Caesar’s estate. That alternate heir was none other than **Brutus**, one of Caesar’s assassins.



Marble statue of Augustus from the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta

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When he was named Caesar's heir, Octavian was nineteen years old—too young to have had much military or political experience. But he soon demonstrated political acumen, initially using to his advantage 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**, these three men renewed the **proscriptions** in 43 BCE, aggressively pursuing the enemies of Caesar while 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 the Roman world into three 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 during the following decade. But a civil war broke out 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 called **Augustus**—ruled what was henceforth known as the Roman Empire. Augustus is considered by modern historians to have been **Rome's first emperor**.

But rather than considering himself Rome's emperor, Augustus claimed to have restored the Roman Republic, and, with the exception of a few elected offices, he did not hold any official position. How then did he manage to rule the Roman Empire for more than forty years? Some answers can be found in the ***Res Gestae Divi Augusti***, an autobiography that Augustus penned the year before he died and that he ordered to be posted on his Mausoleum in Rome, with copies also posted in all major cities throughout the empire.



Copy of the Res Gestae in Modern Ankara, Turkey

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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*. He was especially proud of the title of "**Pater Patriae**," or "Father of the Fatherland," given to him by the Senate to reflect his status as the patron of all citizens. Having learned from Caesar's example, Augustus avoided accepting any titles that might have smacked of a desire for kingship. Instead, he created for himself new titles and powers that were thoroughly grounded in

previous Republican traditions. He was also a master diplomat, sharing power with the Senate in a way that appeared to seamlessly marry the entire Republican political structure with one-man rule.

So when did the Roman Republic actually fall? Different historians have proposed several possible answers. One minority position is that the Republic fell with the dictatorship of Sulla, since it fundamentally altered the nature of the Republican government and permanently destabilized it. Another answer is the assassination of Caesar in 44 BCE, since afterward the Republic was never the same as it had been before the civil war between 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. Or one may equate the death of the Roman Republic with the death of Augustus in 14 CE. Each of these possible dates and events represent the instability of the Roman state in the late first century BCE.

Roman Culture of the Late Republic and the Augustan Age

While the political structure of the Roman Republic in its final century was becoming increasingly unstable, the period starting with the end of the Second Punic War saw the 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, translating them wholesale, Romans injected Roman values into them to make them more 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 the Roman philosophy and rhetoric of the Republic were heavily based on their Greek counterparts, their writers thoroughly Romanized the topics under discussion and how they were presented.

For example, **Cicero**, a preeminent rhetorician and philosopher of the late Republic, adapted the model of the **Socratic dialogue** in several of his philosophical treatises to construct conversations 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 grandiosity 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 shipwrecked 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 in the age of Augustus. Ovid appears to have pushed the envelope beyond acceptable limits, however, in both his poetry or and his personal conduct. 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.



The Ara Pacis, or “Altar of Peace,” Was Built at the Command of Augustus

The Ara Pacis in Rome features a number of mythological scenes and processions of gods; it also incorporates a depiction of Augustus himself making a sacrifice to the gods.

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In addition to expanding literature, Augustus’ reign was also marked by 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 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 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 as an empire truly blessed by the gods.

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 an increasingly smoothly run bureaucratic machine in which commerce prospered and the overall territory grew to its largest extent in the early second century CE. Of course, some Roman subjects were not as happy with what this period meant for 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.

The early Roman Empire also witnessed the rise of a new religion, Christianity. This religion did not have a profound impact on the state as yet, but it planted the seeds that allowed for fundamental changes that would 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 small and insignificant at first.

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 everyone was asking 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 the 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. During the final years of his life,

Augustus gradually shared more of his unofficial powers with Tiberius to smooth the process of succession. Augustus' plan appears to have worked, since after a brief conversation in the Senate after Augustus' death, 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.



Bust of the Emperor Tiberius

Author: User "Manfred Heyde." Source: Wikimedia Commons. License: CC BY-SA 3.0

Similar to Augustus, Tiberius had a difficult time selecting a successor, as each relative who was identified as a candidate met with 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 fewer than four years. In 41 CE, he was assassinated by three disgruntled officers in the Praetorian Guard—the body formed by Augustus to protect the emperor.



Bust of Emperor Caligula

Author: User "Manfred Heyde." Source: Wikimedia Commons. License: CC BY-SA 3.0

Caligula's assassination left Rome in disarray. The biographer Suetonius reports that, while the 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. Because he had a speech impediment, Augustus considered him an embarrassment to the imperial family. Claudius in fact proved to be a productive emperor, but his downfall appears to have been women of poor character, as he repeatedly weathered plots against his life by first one wife and then the next. In 54 CE, Claudius died by poison widely believed to have been the deed of his wife, **Agrippina the Younger**. Since the poison was in the form of mushrooms, as Suetonius tells us, a popular joke thereafter 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 also poisoned soon after his death. His successor instead became **Nero**, his stepson, who was only sixteen years old when he came to power.



Bust of Emperor Claudius

Author: User "Direktor." Source: Wikimedia Commons. License: CC BY-SA 2.5

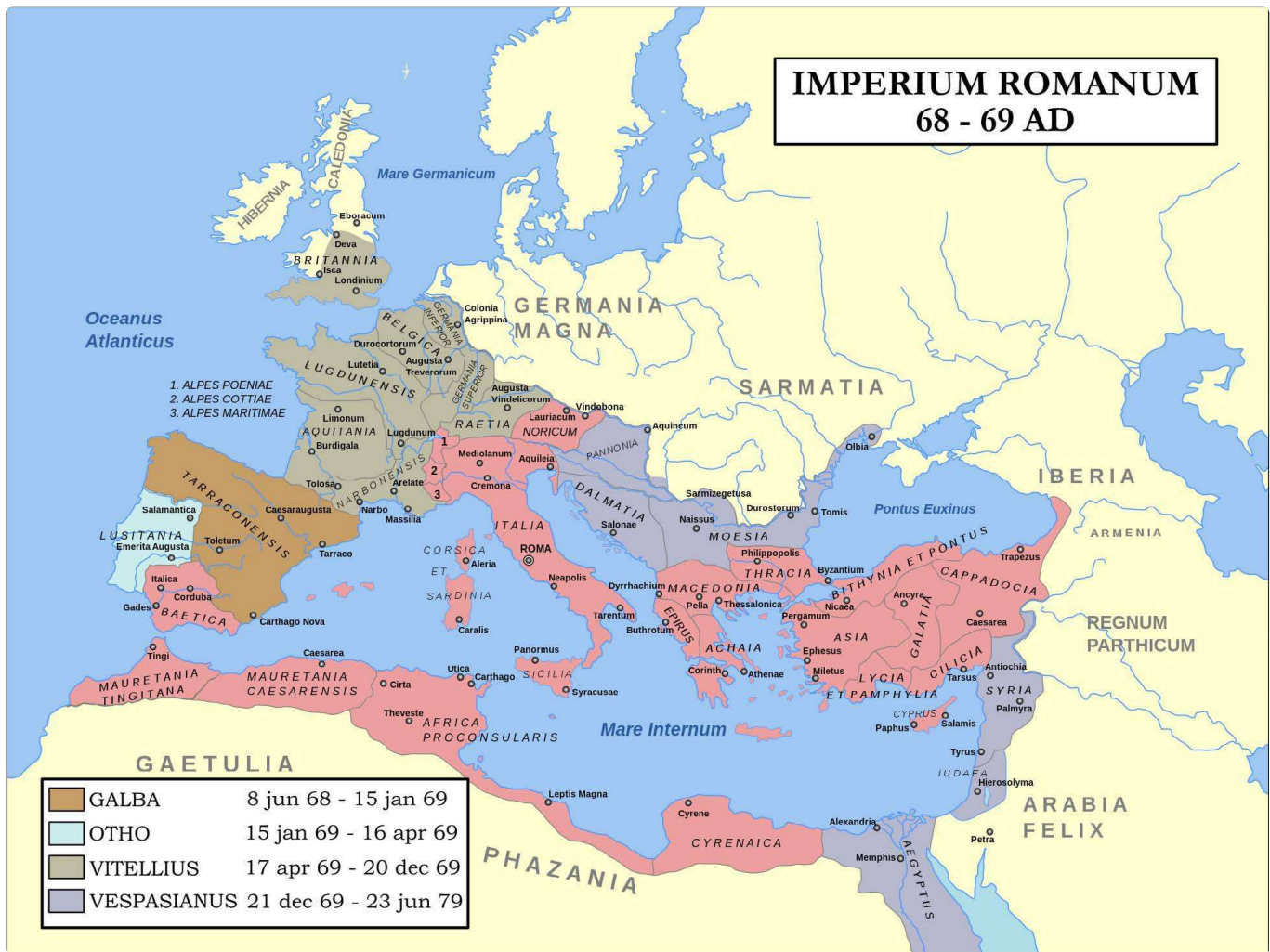
<https://learn.umgc.edu/d2l/le/content/449723/viewContent/17139284/View>

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 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 was the case when a revolt broke out in Judea in 66 CE. Soon afterward, 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 Hispania Tarraconensis (modern-day Spain), **Servius Sulpicius Galba**, to join the rebellion and ultimately 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 68 CE. His death marked the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty.

69 CE: The Year of the Four Emperors

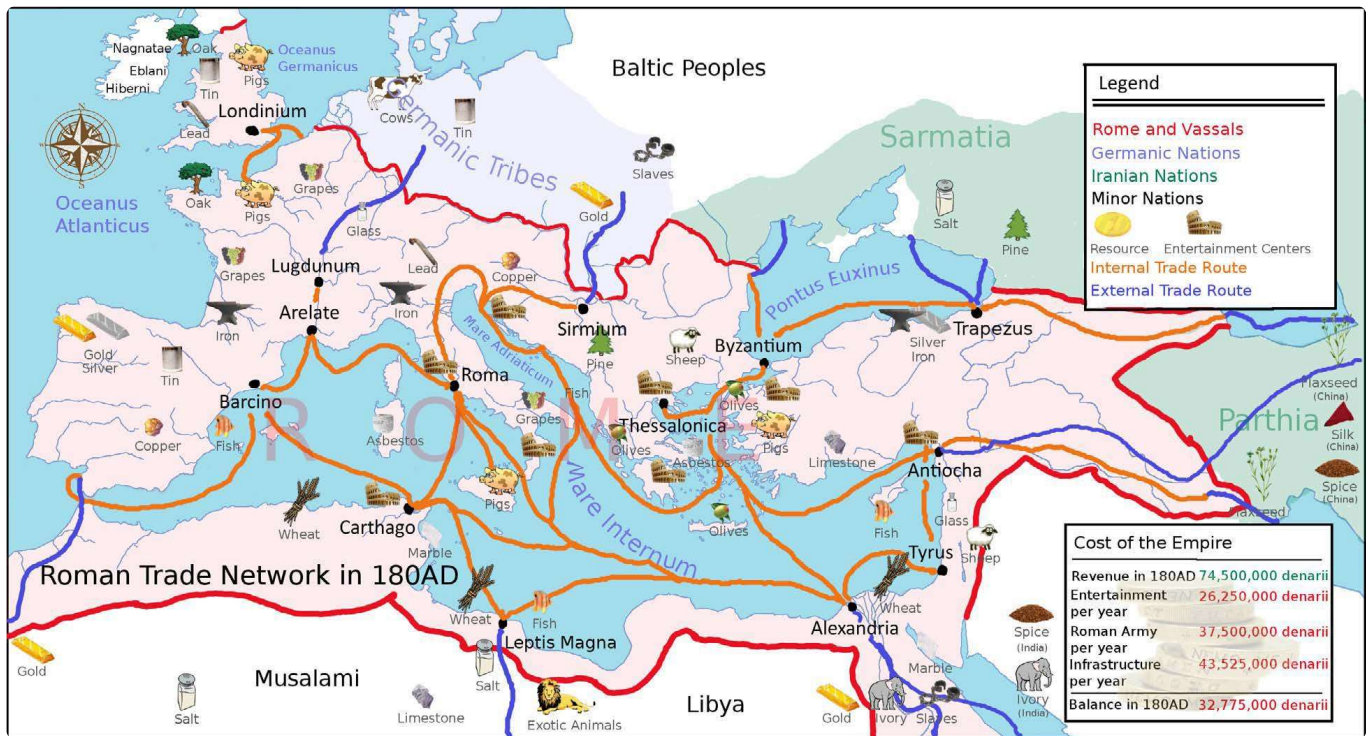
The year and a half after Nero's death saw more civil war and instability throughout the empire than any other period since the late Republic. In particular, the year **69 CE became known as the year of the four emperors**, as four emperors in succession came to power: **Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vespasian**.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



Map of the Roman Empire 68-69 CE

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As the historian Tacitus later noted, the year of the four emperors revealed two key secrets that continued to be a factor in the subsequent history of the Roman Empire. First, emperors could now come from outside of Rome, as was the case when Galba of Spain became emperor. Second, the army could choose 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 the subsequent history of the Roman Empire. These changes represented 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.



Map of Roman trade routes and sources of goods exchanged, c.180 CE

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The Flavian Dynasty and the Five Good Emperors

Several reasons led to **Vespasian**, the son of a tax-collector, being the only successful emperor of 69 CE and the founder of the **Flavian dynasty**. A talented military commander, Vespasian was 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 appointed Vespasian to command the Jewish War because of Vespasian's humble family origins—which to Nero meant that he was not a political threat.

Vespasian was the only one of the four emperors of 69 CE who had grown sons, and thus obvious successors. His son **Titus** was a popular military commander in his own right, and he cemented his reputation more by his conquest of **Jerusalem** in 70 CE.



Arch of Titus

The Arch of Titus commemorates the emperor's victory over Judaea.

Author: User "Jebulon." Source: Wikimedia Commons. License: CC0 1.0

But Flavian dynasty was short-lived, ending in 96 CE with the assassination of Emperor **Domitian**, Vespasian's younger son. Thus the period from 96 CE to 180 CE saw experimentation in determining imperial succession in place of 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 happy for all? Evidence suggests that life in the periphery of Rome could be a very different experience.

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 across 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 between the Roman Empire and its 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.

Most Roman governors received just one person 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 areas of the empire the most at risk for rebellion or outside attack, most governors did not have a legion stationed in their province.

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 between 111 – 113 CE. Pliny was a cautious and conscientious governor, and he believed in consulting the emperor **Trajan** on every issue he encountered in his province. Lucky 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**. The emperor Trajan patiently responded to each letter he received from Pliny and appears to have placed stability and peace in the province foremost in his concerns. For example, with regard to the issue of Christians in Bithynia, Trajan recommends that Pliny not worry about tracking them down, 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** some time 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 an expected occurrence, 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 there were few attacks on the frontiers. Yet life in the provinces was anything but peaceful.

Early Christianity in the Roman Empire

One of the problems that arose in Bithynia during Pliny's reign as governor 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 toward Roman rule.

Pliny's perspective is one of the earliest non-Christian sources about the new religion and illustrates how quickly it had spread across the empire. But how and why did the new religion expand so rapidly, 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 in that few other topics in Roman history have so many primary sources from both the perspectives of insiders and outsiders from the earliest days of the movement. The **New Testament**, in particular, is a valuable collection of primary sources by early Christians about their movement, with some of the letters it contains composed only twenty-five years after **Jesus' crucifixion**.

The New Testament 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 whitewash the early churches; rather, it documents their failings and shortcomings with remarkable frankness, allowing the historian to consider the challenges that early Christians faced from both the outside and within the movement.

A Religion Free of Social Strata

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 each of the four gospels emphasize different parts of the story, it 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 within Judaism, it ultimately floundered in Judea but quickly spread throughout the Greek-speaking world due to early missionaries such as **Paul**.

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 Greek) society. For one thing, the Christian interpretation of God was very different from the pagan belief throughout the ancient Mediterranean in multiple gods. While in traditional Roman paganism the gods had petty concerns and could treat humans unfairly if they so wished, Christians believed that God himself became man and dwelt with men as an equal.

This concept of **God incarnate** had revolutionary implications for social relations. 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. Early Christianity also distinguished itself as an **apocalyptic religion**. Many early Christians believed that Jesus was returning to earth soon, and they eagerly awaited his arrival, which would erase all inequality and social distinctions.



Christ as the Good Shepherd in a third-century CE catacomb painting

Author: User "Wafflws9761." Source: Wikimedia Commons. License: Public Domain

Early Christianity and Gender Roles

By contrast, traditional Roman society was extremely stratified. While the conflict of the orders was ultimately resolved by the mid-Republic, sharp divisions between the rich and poor remained. While social mobility was possible—for example, 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 for women than they had previously known in the ancient world, with only the **Stoics** coming anywhere close to Christian views on gender roles. For example, Christianity allowed women to serve in the church and remain unmarried, if they so chose. Women could even become heroes of their faith by virtue of their lives or deaths, as in the

case of early martyrs. Indeed, the *Passion of the Saints Perpetua and Felicity*, which documents the martyrdom of the two women in Carthage in 203 CE, dramatically illustrates these reversals of Roman tradition.

The Passion of the Saints Perpetua and Felicity was compiled by an editor shortly after the fact and includes the **prison diary** that Perpetua kept while awaiting execution. The inclusion of a woman's writings already makes the text unusual, as virtually all surviving texts from the Roman world are authored by men. Although Perpetua was a noblewoman, she was imprisoned and martyred together with her slave, Felicity. The two women, as the text attests, saw each other as equals, despite their obvious social distinction. Perpetua also bucked tradition in that she challenged her father's authority as *paterfamilias* by refusing to obey his command to renounce her faith and secure her freedom. Such outright disobedience would have been shocking to Roman audiences.

Both Perpetua and Felicity placed their roles as mothers beneath their Christian identities, as both gave up their babies upon their martyrdom. Their story, as those of other martyrs, was truly shocking in its rebellion against Roman values. But the extraordinary faith of these women in the face of death proved contagious. As recent research shows, Christian conversion in the Roman Empire sped up over the course of the second and third centuries CE, despite periodic persecutions by emperors such as **Septimius Severus**, who issued an edict in 203 CE forbidding any conversions to Judaism or Christianity. That edict led to the execution of Perpetua and Felicity.

Most early Christians lived less eventful lives than those of Perpetua and Felicity, but the reversals to tradition inherent in Christianity appear clearly in their lives as well. The New Testament, portions of which were written as early as the 60s CE, states that the earliest Christians were from all walks of life. The apostle Paul, for example, was a tentmaker. Some other professions of Christians and new converts 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 women, slaves, and non-citizen free males.

Stories preserved in Acts and in the epistles of Paul that are included in the New Testament reveal the ways in which these very different Christian converts tried to come together and treat one another 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?).

It's important to note that early Christianity appears to have been predominantly an **urban religion**, spreading most quickly through urban centers. Paul's letters address churches in different cities throughout the Greek-speaking world, illustrating the existence of a network of relationships between the early churches, despite the physical distance between them. Through that network, churches were able to carry out group projects, such as fundraising for areas in distress, and they could assist Christian missionaries with 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.

While the Roman Empire flourished in second century CE, the third century was a time of crisis, defined by political instability and civil wars. These conflicts ultimately demonstrated that the empire had become too large to be effectively controlled by one ruler. 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 to divide the empire ushered in a new model of rule, one which lasted—albeit with some interruptions—until the last Western emperor, **Romulus Augustulus**, was deposed in 476 CE.

While the political narrative of the third century and the Late Antiquity Empire could be described as a story of decline and fall (as the British historian Gibbon famously called it), it was also a period in which culture—especially Christian culture—flourished and replaced the traditional Roman pagan mode of thinking. Far from being a time of cultural “decline and fall,” Late Antiquity looked forward to the world of the Middle Ages. It was the period of Roman history that produced some of its most influential leaders, most notably, **Constantine**.

The Third-Century Crisis and Christianity in the Empire

Although composed during a time of prosperity in the Empire, Apuleius' novel ***Metamorphoses*** indicated tensions in the provinces that represented the failure of the empire to govern all of its 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 occurring across the empire. In effect, the **third-century crisis** was the year 69 CE all over again, except 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 revealed again.

In 235 CE, the emperor **Severus Alexander** was assassinated by his troops on campaign, who then proclaimed as emperor their general **Maximinus Thrax**. During the subsequent half-century, **twenty-six emperors** were officially recognized by the Roman Senate, and a number of others were proclaimed emperors but did not live long enough to consolidate power and be officially accepted by the Senate. Most of these new emperors were military generals who were proclaimed for their valor by their troops on campaign. Most of them did not have any previous political experience and thus no clear program for ruling an empire. Competing claims to the empire's leadership resulted in the temporary breaking away from the Roman Empire of regions to the East and the Northwest.



Map of the Roman Empire during the Third-Century Crisis

Author: User "Wanwa." Source: Wikimedia Commons. License: CC BY-SA 3.0

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 pressure on the frontiers, a plague that was devastating 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 inflation hit full-force.

Diocletian's Experimental Tetrarchy

The third-century crisis affirmed that a single emperor stationed in Rome was no longer capable of handling the challenges posed by ruling such a vast territory. So recognized the man who ended the crisis: **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 had possessed. Realizing that a single ruler in charge of the entire empire was very vulnerable to an assassination that 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 selected as capitals cities of strategic importance, taking into account factors such 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. 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. Some modern historians have described Diocletian as the most significant Roman reformer since Augustus.



Map of the Roman Empire under the Tetrarchy

To better govern the massive Roman Empire, Emperor Diocletian established a new system of rule he called the Tetrarchy, or “Rule of Four,” which divided the empire into four regions, each with its own ruler and capital.

Author: Coppermine Photo Gallery. Source: Wikimedia Commons. License: CC BY-SA 3.0

Diocletian’s political experiment was most clearly successful in its achievement of one goal: ending the third-century crisis. The four emperors were able to rule the empire together 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. Each Tetrarch has one hand on the hilt of his sword and hugs one of the other Tetrarchs with the other.



State Column of the Tetrarchs

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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 a smooth transition of power, Diocletian abdicated in 305 CE and required Maximian to do the same. The two Caesares—who ruled as the junior emperors—were promoted to Augusti, and two new Caesares were appointed. The following year, however, **Constantius Chlorus**, a newly minted Augustus, died. His death resulted in a series of wars for succession, ending Diocletian's experiment with the Tetrarchy. The wars ended when Constantius' son, **Constantine**, reunited the entire Roman Empire under his rule in 324 CE. In the process, Constantine also brought about a major religious shift in the empire.

From Constantine to Rome's Last Pagans

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 this religious legacy, transforming Roman ways of thinking about religion itself. By the early fourth century CE, historians estimate that about ten percent of those living in the Roman Empire were Christians. Under Constantine's endorsement of Christianity, however, this previously largely underground faith grew exponentially.

The emperor's conversion must have seemed nothing short of miraculous to his contemporaries, and contemporary sources explain it by recounting a miracle. 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* and *Rho*, the first two letters of Christ's name in the Greek alphabet) on his soldiers' shields to ensure victory.

Constantine was victorious in battle, and he went on to play a major role in church government over the course of his rule, although he was not baptized until he was on his deathbed. Constantine is responsible for summoning the **First Council of Nicaea** in 325 CE, which gathered major bishops from across the empire. The Council settled, among other issues, the question of the relationship between 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 of Nicaea set a significant precedent for communication among bishops in the empire. It was 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.

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, and he renamed it **Constantinople**. The location had strategic advantages for the empire at that stage. Besides having an excellent harbor, it was close to the Persian and Danube frontiers, a troubled area that required attention from the emperor. Constantine referred to the rebuilt city as "New Rome," sending the message that his rule was a new beginning of a **Christian Roman 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). Later, **Emperor Theodosius** gradually banned paganism altogether by 395 CE. 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 disappeared.

Augustine and the Theological Destruction of Rome

Imagine 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 your home 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 terribly wrong along the way, testing the gods' patience with Rome. A new religious sect that began in Judaea in the first century CE started worshipping 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: the ultimate punishment for this rebellious state.

That punishment came in 410 CE, when the city of Rome, untouched by a foreign foe since the early days of the Republic, was sacked by the **Goths**, a Germanic tribe led by the fearsome **Alaric**. Such was the thought process of the typical Roman pagan, particularly the pagan aristocrat, a few of which were left by 410 CE. In response to the theological questions raised by the Goth invasion, **Augustine**—a veteran Christian theologian, philosopher, and bishop of Hippo in North Africa—wrote the final magnum opus of his career, a monumental twenty-two-book effort that he appropriately titled *De Civitate Dei Contra Paganos*, or *On the City of God Against the Pagans*.



Fresco painting of Augustine, sixth century CE

Author: User "Mladifilozof." Source: Wikimedia Commons. License: Public Domain

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. **Peter Brown**, the scholar credited with creating the academic field of the study of **Late Roman Antiquity**, began his career as a researcher by writing a biography of Augustine. 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.

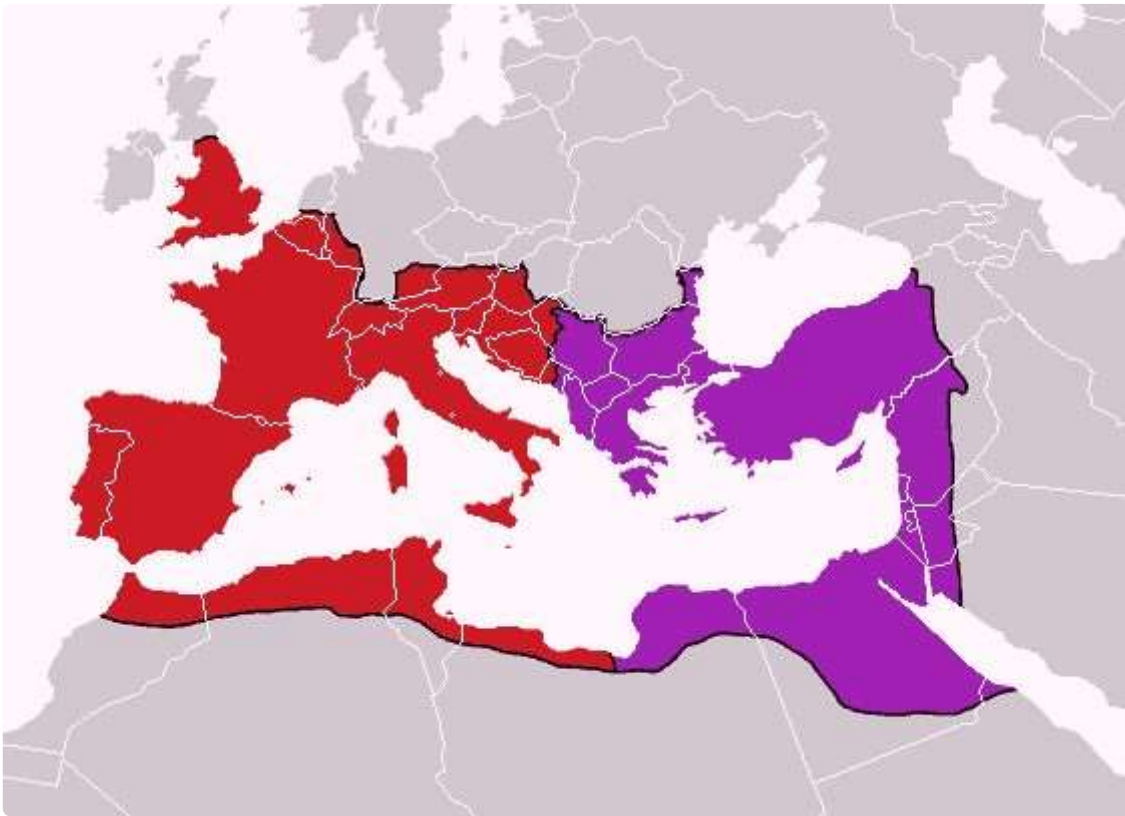
In his book, Augustine challenges the core of Roman traditional beliefs about the state by arguing against the fundamental pagan belief that Roman success was the result of the *pax deorum*. Augustine was effectively arguing that there was nothing special about Rome itself. It only prospered in its earlier history because God allowed it to do so.

Furthermore, Augustine wrote, the obsession with Rome was emblematic of the faulty human obsession with the earthly kingdom and way of life. The **City of God** was the only place that mattered, claimed Augustine, 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 the threat of invasion or destruction.

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 the **Eastern and Western Empires**, with instability and pressures on the frontiers continuing, particularly in the West.



The Eastern and Western Roman Empires in 395 CE

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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 southeastern China. The Huns were responsible for an especially prolific period of conquest in the 440s and early 450s CE under the leadership of their ruler, **Attila**. While they were unable to retain 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. During the next five hundred years, led by ambitious tribal chiefs, these territories coalesced into actual kingdoms. Rome was gone, but 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 of the Eastern Roman Empire in 477 CE

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