

THE ROMAN REPUBLIC



Beginning in the eighth century B.C., Ancient Rome grew from a small town on central Italy's Tiber River into an empire that at its peak encompassed most of continental Europe, Britain, much of western Asia, northern Africa and the Mediterranean islands. Among the many legacies of Roman dominance are the widespread use of the Romance languages (Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Romanian) derived from Latin, the modern Western alphabet and calendar and the emergence of Christianity as a major world religion. After 450 years as a republic, Rome became an empire in the wake of Julius Caesar's rise and fall in the first century B.C. The long and triumphant reign of its first emperor, Augustus, began a golden age of peace and prosperity; by contrast, the empire's decline and fall by the fifth century A.D. was one of the most dramatic implosions in the history of human civilization.

THE EARLY REPUBLIC

The power of the monarch passed to two annually elected magistrates called consuls; they also served as commanders in chief of the army. The magistrates, though elected by the people, were drawn largely from the Senate, which was dominated by the patricians, or the descendants of the original senators from the time of Romulus. Politics in the early republic was marked by the long struggle between patricians and plebeians (the common

people), who eventually attained some political power through years of concessions from patricians, including their own political bodies, the tribunes, which could initiate or veto legislation.

In 450 B.C., the first Roman law code was inscribed on 12 bronze tablets—known as the Twelve Tables—and publicly displayed in the Roman Forum. These laws included issues of legal procedure, civil rights and property rights and provided the basis for all future Roman civil law. By around 300 B.C., real political power in Rome was centered in the Senate, which at the time included only members of patrician and wealthy plebeian families.

MILITARY EXPANSION

During the early republic, the Roman state grew exponentially in both size and power. Though the Gauls sacked and burned Rome in 390 B.C., the Romans rebounded under the leadership of the military hero Camillus, eventually gaining control of the entire Italian peninsula by 264 B.C. Rome then fought a series of wars known as the [Punic Wars](#) with Carthage, a powerful city-state in northern Africa. The first two Punic Wars ended with Rome in full control of Sicily, the western Mediterranean and much of Spain. In the Third Punic War (149–146 B.C.), the Romans captured and destroyed the city of Carthage and sold its surviving inhabitants into slavery, making a section of northern Africa a Roman province. At the same time, Rome also spread its influence east, defeating King Philip V of Macedonia in the Macedonian Wars and turning his kingdom into another Roman province.



Roman swords were short. This sword belonged to a Roman army officer.

Rome's military conquests led directly to its cultural growth as a society, as the Romans benefited greatly from contact with such advanced cultures as the Greeks. The first Roman literature appeared around 240 B.C., with translations of Greek classics into Latin; Romans would eventually adopt much of Greek art, philosophy and religion.



Roman soldiers at Birdoswald Fort

Close

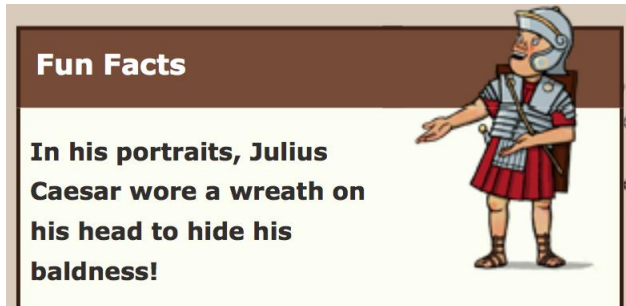


This modern painting shows Roman soldiers at Birdoswald Fort (Hadrian's Wall). A centurion watches men training.

FROM CAESAR TO AUGUSTUS

A rising star in Roman politics was Gaius [Julius Caesar](#). After earning military glory in Spain, Caesar returned to Rome to vie for the consulship in 59 B.C. From his alliance with Pompey and Crassus, Caesar received the governorship of three wealthy provinces in Gaul beginning in 58 B.C.; he then set about conquering the rest of the region for Rome. Less than a year later, Caesar was murdered by a group of his enemies (led by the republican nobles Marcus Junius Brutus and Gaius Cassius). Consul [Mark Antony](#) and Caesar's great-nephew and adopted heir, Octavian, joined forces to crush Brutus and Cassius and divided power in Rome with ex-consul Lepidus in what was known as the Second Triumvirate. With Octavian leading the western provinces, Antony the east, and Lepidus Africa, tensions developed by 36 B.C. and the triumvirate soon dissolved. In 31 B.C., Octavian triumphed over the forces of Antony and Queen [Cleopatra](#) of Egypt (also rumored to be the onetime lover of Julius Caesar) in the Battle of Actium. In the wake of this devastating defeat, Antony and Cleopatra committed suicide.

By 29 B.C., Octavian was the sole leader of Rome and all its provinces. To avoid meeting Caesar's fate, he made sure to make his position as absolute ruler acceptable to the public by apparently restoring the political institutions of the Roman republic while in reality retaining all real power for himself. In 27 B.C., Octavian assumed the title of **Augustus**, becoming the first emperor of Rome.



AGE OF THE EMPERORS

Augustus' rule restored morale in Rome after a century of discord and corruption and ushered in the famous *pax Romana*—two full centuries of peace and prosperity. He instituted various social reforms, won numerous military victories and allowed Roman literature, art, architecture and religion to flourish. Augustus ruled for 56 years, supported by his great army and by a growing cult of devotion to the emperor. When he died, the Senate elevated Augustus to the status of a god, beginning a long-running tradition of deification for popular emperors.



DECLINE AND DISINTEGRATION

The decadence and incompetence of Commodus (180-192) brought the golden age of the Roman emperors to a disappointing end. His death at the hands of his own ministers sparked another period of civil war, from which Lucius Septimius Severus (193-211) emerged victorious. During the third century Rome suffered from a cycle of near-constant conflict. A total of 22 emperors took the throne, many of them meeting violent ends at the hands of the same soldiers who had propelled them to power. Meanwhile, threats from outside plagued the empire and depleted its riches, including continuing aggression from Germans and Parthians and raids by the Goths over the Aegean Sea.

The stability of this system suffered greatly after Diocletian and Maximian retired from office. Constantine (the son of Constantius) emerged from the ensuing power struggles as sole emperor of a reunified Rome in 324. He moved the Roman capital to the Greek city of Byzantium, which he renamed Constantinople. At the Council of Nicaea in 325, Constantine made Christianity (once an obscure Jewish sect) Rome's official religion.

Roman unity under Constantine proved illusory, and 30 years after his death the eastern and western empires were again divided. Despite its continuing battle against Persian forces, the eastern Roman Empire—later known as the Byzantine Empire—would remain largely intact for centuries to come. An entirely different story played out in the west, where the empire was wracked by internal conflict as well as threats from abroad—particularly from the Germanic tribes now established within the empire's frontiers—and was steadily losing money due to constant warfare.

Rome eventually collapsed under the weight of its own bloated empire, losing its provinces one by one: Britain around 410; Spain and northern Africa by 430. Attila and his brutal Huns invaded Gaul and Italy around 450, further shaking the foundations of the empire. In September 476, a Germanic prince named Odovacar won control of the Roman army in Italy. After deposing the last western emperor, Romulus Augustus, Odovacar's troops proclaimed him king of Italy, bringing an ignoble end to the long, tumultuous history of ancient Rome.

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<<http://www.history.com/topics/ancient-history/ancient-rome>>.