

# The Romans Connect the Mediterranean World, 753 B.C.E.–284 C.E.



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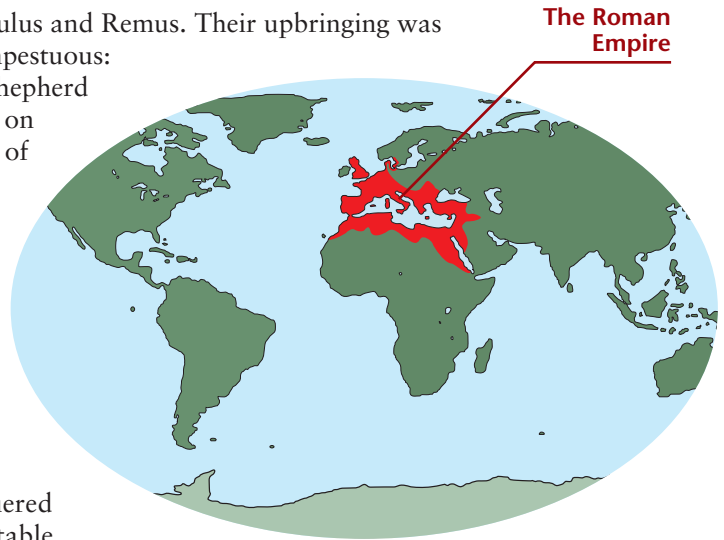
## Romulus And Remus

A statue of Romulus and Remus being suckled by a she-wolf. This legend encouraged Romans to consider themselves tough, resilient people accustomed to overcoming hardships (page 183).

According to Roman legend, in the early eighth century B.C.E. the daughter of a local king in central Italy was impregnated by Mars, the god of war. Then she was killed by her uncle for having disgraced the family by surrendering her virginity. Just before she died, she gave birth to twin sons, who were left on a roadside to die. But a she-wolf came upon them, and rather than devouring the helpless infants, she nursed them. Eventually the twins were discovered by passing shepherds, who adopted them and raised them as their own.

The twins of this legend were named Romulus and Remus. Their upbringing was unconventional, and their adolescence was tempestuous: Romulus killed his brother and fled from the shepherd family that had raised him. Then in 753 B.C.E., on the banks of the River Tiber in the fertile plain of Latium (*LĀ-shē-um*) in west-central Italy, he founded a village that, according to the story, became the city of Rome.

Although legendary, this account of Rome's origin reflects the Romans' image of themselves as offspring of the god of war, toughened by the milk of a she-wolf. (see page 182). Proud of their origins, the Romans created influential institutions and helped spread the cultural contributions of ancient Greece and Christianity as they conquered and then managed one of history's most adaptable, effective, and enduring empires.



## The Roman Republic to 133 B.C.E.

The true story of Rome's founding is somewhat less dramatic than its legendary one. Archeological evidence dates the initial habitation of Latium, in west-central Italy, to around 1000 B.C.E. Three tribes from central Italy appear to have clustered there, possibly on account of the location's advantages. Built on seven hills surrounding a place on the Tiber River that could be bridged, the developing city enjoyed formidable natural defenses against land-based attacks. At the same time, the 14 miles that separated it from the Mediterranean Sea provided defense against both pirates and naval landings. As the city's later inhabitants also learned, their central location in the Mediterranean basin was close to major trade routes and a good place from which to rule the entire region. Potential competitors, such as Sicily's Syracuse and North Africa's Carthage, were also well located, but, being seaport cities, they were more vulnerable to naval assaults (Map 8.1).

### Rivalry with Etruria

At first the Romans were ruled by the kings of Etruria (*ib-TRUR-ē-uh*), a plain northwest of Latium (Map 8.2). The people of Etruria, known as Etruscans, had adapted the Greek writing system to fit their local language, thereby creating what came to be known as the

Etruria creates a trading network in the Mediterranean basin

## FOUNDATION MAP 8.1 Rome, Carthage, and the Central Mediterranean

Italy's topography is as rugged as that of Greece, but while Greece remained divided, Rome managed to unite the entire Italian peninsula. The mountains of Greece encouraged the development of independent city-states with different forms of governance. In Italy, Rome's domination of the peninsula, based in large measure on its central location astride principal north-south communication routes, made unification possible. Note that only 350 nautical miles separated Carthage from Rome. Why would Carthage's location, at the southwestern end of the neck of water between Sicily and North Africa, eventually lead to rivalry with Rome?



Latin alphabet. They also brought Rome into a Mediterranean commercial network.

What little we know about the Etruscans comes primarily from their cemeteries. Their durable tombs, cut out of solid rock, were filled with exquisite goods made of iron, bronze, and gold. Etruscan pottery and copper and tin metalwork found in these tombs have also been uncovered in North Africa, the eastern Mediterranean, and along the Rhine and Danube Rivers in Europe. Clearly Etruria had a broad trading network that used central Italy's rich tin and copper deposits to advantage. Rome's resistance to Etruscan rule probably was due not only to political and ethnic differences but also to Rome's desire to capture and expand Etruscan trade routes.

In addition to archeological knowledge, we have very few written accounts of Etruria. We do, however, have this suggestive description from the Greek historian Theopompus of Chios: "Sharing wives is an established Etruscan custom. Etruscan women take particular care of their bodies and exercise often. It is not a disgrace for them to be seen naked. Further, they dine not with their own husbands, but with any men who happen to be present. They are expert drinkers and are very good looking."

Roman legend assigns the early city seven kings, the last of whom was an Etruscan tyrant whose misdeeds provoked the ambitious Romans to revolt in 509 B.C.E. According to Roman tradition, the uprising succeeded, although archeological evidence indicates that the Etruscans did not withdraw from Latium until after their defeat at the hands of a Greek naval force in 474 B.C.E. Nevertheless, the expulsion of the Etruscans was commemorated by Romans for centuries as the end of tyranny and the beginning of rule by a *res publica* (*RĀZ POOB-lick-ah*, or "public possession"). Thus began the Roman Republic, a flexible form of government by elected representatives that proved capable of military conquest and administrative efficiency.

### Map 8.2 Italy in 600 B.C.E.

Italy in 600 B.C.E. was heavily influenced by non-Italian peoples. Observe that Carthaginians controlled Corsica, Sardinia, and western Sicily, while Greeks dominated the remainder of Sicily and the southwestern tip of the Italian Peninsula. Etruscans controlled most of Italy north of Rome. Rome's victory over Etruria guaranteed the Romans domination over Italy and laid the foundation for their rivalry with Carthage for control of the Mediterranean. Why would the Greek colonies, as outposts not of a centralized Greek state but of individual city-states, be unable to intervene decisively in the Roman-Carthaginian rivalry?



Rome dominates Italy by defeating Etruria

## The Republic and Its Foundation in Law

The government of the Roman Republic was grounded in principles and practices unlike those developed earlier in Greece. Athenian democracy was based on the right of all adult male citizens to debate, deliberate, and vote. This type of government—a direct



democracy—was possible in a city-state with a limited population, but Rome was larger than Athens, and it tended to keep growing. The Romans therefore governed themselves through a republic—a system in which all adult male citizens voted not on the issues of the day but for representatives elected to a variety of assemblies that drafted, debated, and passed laws. If the citizens did not approve of the laws, they could vote the representatives out of office in the next election.

The Roman representative assemblies, however, did not have full authority over public affairs. The Republic's principal political institution was the senate, which was an advisory body composed of the most prestigious statesmen of Rome. The senate was dominated by patricians, wealthy landowners who led Rome's military units and who constituted the majority of the educated class. Senators selected new members of the senate, often nominating their own sons or relatives. The senate elected Rome's two consuls, officials who administered the state for one-year terms.

Rome establishes a Republic based on law

The governments of Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, and Persia were based largely on the power and personalities of individual rulers, but Rome's government was based on laws. Rulers in those other civilizations made the laws; in Rome, rulers were subject to the laws. Roman law distinguished between civil and criminal procedures. It aimed at developing solutions that would be fair to all parties in a dispute. In this pursuit it proved remarkably flexible, sometimes relying on precedent, sometimes on concepts of both common and individual good, and sometimes on common sense. As Rome expanded beyond its traditional boundaries, it amplified its civil law into "law of peoples," which applied to Romans and foreigners alike. The "law of peoples," in turn, evolved into **natural law**, a Roman vision of legal principles applicable to all societies regardless of time or circumstance. The necessity of ruling many non-Roman peoples encouraged Roman jurists to develop universally valid legal standards, and these influenced subsequent legal systems and laid the foundations of international law.

This legal system helped regulate a bitterly divisive social contest between patricians and plebeians known as the **Struggle of the Orders**. Common people, or plebeians (*plib-BĒ-uns*), frustrated in their attempts to attain a meaningful voice in state affairs, went on strike in 494 B.C.E. and withdrew from the city, creating their own assembly apart from the senate. This new assembly elected tribunes, or spokesmen who were charged with protecting the plebeians' rights and presenting their concerns to the senate. Even more alarming to the patricians, however, was the plebeians' refusal to serve in the army. Since commoners were the foot soldiers, without whom there would be no army, the patricians were forced to give in. Over the next two centuries they yielded their privileged legal and political positions bit by bit.

The Struggle of the Orders strengthens the Roman Republic

By 471 B.C.E. the patricians accepted the assembly, although its decisions did not enjoy the status of law until 287 B.C.E. In 450 B.C.E., plebeian agitation forced patricians to publish the famous Law of the Twelve Tables (see "Excerpt from the Twelve Tables"), a series of laws displayed on twelve tablets along with regulations governing legal procedure. Published and public laws thus opened the legal system to full use by all free men, breaking the patricians' monopoly. By 342 B.C.E. the patricians yielded further, agreeing to the plebeian demand that one of the two consuls be a plebeian. Gradually, wealthier plebeians moved into the patrician class, which grudgingly allowed them a role in the governing of the Republic. But when the Struggle of the Orders ended in 287 B.C.E., all Roman citizens were equal before the law. Roman practicality and flexibility prevailed,

## Document 8.1 Excerpt from the Twelve Tables

The Roman Republic encapsulated its most important laws in the book of Twelve Tables, which the great orator Cicero praised as follows: “Though all the world exclaim against me, I will say what I think: that single little book of the Twelve Tables, if anyone look to the fountains and sources of laws, seems to me, assuredly, to surpass the libraries of all the philosophers, both in weight of authority, and in plenitude of utility.” (Cicero, *De Oratore*, I, 44.)

### TABLE I

1. If anyone summons a man before the magistrate, he must go. If the man summoned does not go, let the one summoning him call the bystanders to witness and then take him by force.
3. If illness or old age is the hindrance, let the summoner provide a team. He need not provide a covered carriage with a pallet unless he chooses.

### TABLE II

2. He whose witness has failed to appear may summon him by loud calls before his house every third day.

### TABLE IV

1. A dreadfully deformed child shall be quickly killed.
2. If a father sell his son three times, the son shall be free from his father.

5. A child born after ten months since the father's death will not be admitted into a legal inheritance.

### TABLE V

1. Females should remain in guardianship even when they have attained their majority.

### TABLE VIII

3. If one is slain while committing theft by night, he is rightly slain.
4. If a patron shall have devised any deceit against his client, let him be accursed.
13. It is unlawful for a thief to be killed by day . . . unless he defends himself with a weapon; even though he has come with a weapon, unless he shall use the weapon and fight back, you shall not kill him. And even if he resists, first call out so that someone may hear and come up.

### TABLE IX

4. The penalty shall be capital for a judge or arbiter legally appointed who has been found guilty of receiving a bribe for giving a decision.

### TABLE XI

1. Marriages should not take place between plebeians and patricians.

SOURCE: Oliver J. Thatcher, ed., *The Library of Original Sources*, Volume III: *The Roman World* (Milwaukee: University Research Extension Co., 1901) 9–11.

and rather than being plunged into civil war, the Republic evolved into a healthier, stronger system of government.

The equality of all citizens before the law naturally exalted citizenship, a privilege conferred upon all adult males who, by birth or adoption, belonged to one of the three tribes that had founded the city. Roman citizenship entitled the holder to a number of rights, including the right to appeal any official decision to the highest authorities. Citizens of Rome were also safe from unjust imprisonment, and the authorities were required to treat them with respect. The highest positions in the Republic were open to any citizen, regardless of ancestry or wealth.

Like the Persians, Rome tried to assimilate the peoples it conquered, and eventually the benefits of citizenship were employed in this process. The most talented and useful males in tribes or ethnic groups subdued by Rome were offered full citizenship and the opportunity to advance their careers in the service of a great and powerful state.

Rome uses citizenship as a benefit

This practice made Roman citizenship one of the most highly prized distinctions of its day. The proud boast, “*Civis Romanus sum*” (*CHIH-vis rō-MAHN-us SOOM*, “I am a Roman citizen”), commanded immediate respect throughout the Roman Empire. Some foreigners even sold themselves into slavery to Rome, hoping someday to be freed and become citizens. But Rome’s decision to grant citizenship to some foreigners while withholding it from others transformed citizenship from a right into a privilege. The legacy for some modern European nations has been to use citizenship as a reward that can be revoked if a citizen’s conduct proves offensive to the state.

Romans were proud of their government and laws. Representative government, the Twelve Tables, equality before the law, and citizenship as privilege combined to make it possible for Rome to rule the Mediterranean basin.

### The Punic Wars and Rome’s Mediterranean Domination

Rome’s domination of the Mediterranean basin was first achieved, however, by its powerful army. The Roman army was divided into legions of approximately 5,000 men each, subdivided into centuries of 100 men, each of which was commanded by a centurion. Every adult male was required to serve in the army for as long as he was needed, and no man was permitted to run for public office unless he had served at least 10 years, thus making military service a springboard for influence in politics. In ordinary times, between 10 and 15 percent of men served in the legions; in emergencies, this figure rose to 25 percent. No society matched this degree of militarization before World War I, and Rome managed it for centuries.

Rome’s legions enable it to project its power beyond the Italian peninsula

Rome’s army was superbly trained and equipped. Infantry legions were accustomed to 20-mile forced marches, the distance being measured by counting the soldiers’ steps: each double (left-right) step was about 5 feet, and 1,000 such steps took them a “mile” (derived from *mille*, the Latin word for “thousand”). Food consisted of bread and vegetables, a diet so ingrained that on one occasion soldiers objected when they had to eat meat instead. Courage was richly rewarded through promotions and honors, while cowards were stoned or flogged to death. If a century broke and ran in the face of the enemy, the penalty was *decimation*: every tenth soldier in the entire legion would be executed.

This combination of harsh discipline and constant training, together with skilled, experienced commanders, gave the legions a degree of self-assurance bordering on arrogance. Like tightrope walkers who remain unafraid because they *know* they will not fall, the armies of the Roman Republic moved steadily from conquest to conquest, losing an occasional battle but never a war. They reacted to defeat with bemusement and returned until they finally won. Magnanimous in victory, they aimed not merely to conquer but also to rule diverse peoples and integrate them into the Roman state.

Rome and Carthage struggle for Mediterranean domination

Rome’s principal rival for control of the Mediterranean was the city of Carthage, the former Phoenician colony (Chapter 2) that had become a great naval power on the central North African coast (Map 8.3). Carthage tried for decades to conquer the large island of Sicily, off the tip of southern Italy, which it intended to use as a staging area





amounted to a land battle on a ship. Given the power of its infantry, Rome usually won such engagements.

Now Rome owned territory outside Italy and would have to defend, tax, and govern it. Within three years, Rome also took control of the Mediterranean islands of Sardinia and Corsica. Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica were designated as provinces, subordinate regional units, each of which had its own governor and local administration and were not directly subject to the authority of the senate, an arrangement that later contributed to the fragmentation of the Republic.

Carthage fought back, led by Hannibal, a brilliant military tactician outraged by Rome's seizure of Sardinia and Corsica. Hannibal began the Second Punic War (218–201 B.C.E.) by crossing the Mediterranean to southern France, then invading Italy from the north, crossing the Alps with troops and war elephants. It turned out that the elephants' huge feet could grip the narrow, slippery Alpine paths more securely than the hooves of horses. Hannibal's innovative tactics enabled him to surround and crush the Roman legions, but he never marched on Rome itself, probably realizing that subjugating and occupying the city would be beyond the strength of Carthage. From his viewpoint, the most desirable outcome would be Rome's surrender of its provinces, so that its domains would be limited to the Italian peninsula. But Hannibal was eventually forced to return to Carthage when Roman forces conquered coastal Spain, and there he lost the Second Punic War.

Over the next 53 years, the Mediterranean balance of power was firmly reoriented in favor of Rome. During this period, the Republic acquired an extensive empire. The senate authorized the pacification of Spain and the subjugation of Macedon and Greece, placing each of these areas under a Roman governor and, as with the three Mediterranean islands, designating them as provinces. In the Third and final Punic War (149–146 B.C.E.), Rome completely destroyed the city of Carthage, sold the survivors into slavery, and claimed Carthage's empire. North Africa's grain surpluses henceforth fed the masses of Rome.

The Punic Wars constituted a major turning point in the history of the Mediterranean basin. Carthage neither shared nor appreciated Rome's devotion to the rule of law, representative government, and equality of all citizens. A Carthaginian victory would have relegated Rome to the status of a historical oddity, a high-minded political experiment that was unable to compete effectively with less sophisticated states. Rome's triumph, on the other hand, helped to preserve these political values, as well as to ensure Rome's domination of the Mediterranean. By 133 B.C.E., the Roman Republic had established nine non-Italian provinces, making it an empire in all but name. Its new status changed it considerably.

## Changes in Society and Culture

Rome's domination of the Mediterranean led to changes in social stratification, gender relations, and the institution of slavery. The first change altered Rome's social divisions from political to economic. The wealth that came with conquest obscured the old patrician-plebeian distinction and replaced it with a gap between those who profited economically from expansion and those who did not. The newly rich as likely came from plebeian background as patrician. Now talent, ambition, and good fortune,

Hannibal's tactical innovations frustrate but do not defeat the Romans

Rome's triumph preserves its political values

Victory over Carthage alters Roman society

rather than birth alone, were the means to success. The new gap that developed between the rich and the poor proved more difficult to bridge than the old distinction between patrician and plebeian.

Changes in Roman society also gave women a more elevated status than that found in other societies of the time. Persia and Greece had relegated women to the private life of the family, but in Rome, women routinely appeared in public and presided at meals where both sexes were present. Within the family the patriarch ruled, but clearly women were active participants in decision-making, consulted by their husbands in all matters pertaining to the family's welfare. They enjoyed their own religious rituals, cults, and festivals from which men were excluded.

Outside the home, Roman women enjoyed a significant measure of independence—able to own property, conduct monetary transactions, and even manage businesses. A few women became physicians, practicing gynecology, and many plebeian women became midwives. Even at the highest levels of male-dominated society, women's influence was felt: Roman senators spoke freely of being lobbied by their wives, and under the Empire women, such as the Empress Livia, second wife of Caesar Augustus, exercised considerable indirect power over political affairs. From time to time the Roman assemblies passed laws restricting the rights or mobility of women. These laws sparked formal protests, most notably in 195 B.C.E., when numerous women picketed the senate and forced the repeal of a law forbidding women to ride alone in carriages. Men retained ultimate authority in private and public life, but few of them underestimated or ignored female influence.

A third change altered the Roman institution of slavery. Like many other ancient civilizations, Rome enslaved people to labor on behalf of others. In Rome's early days many citizens owned a few slaves, who worked as domestic servants or agricultural laborers. These slaves were almost always from the Italian peninsula, usually captured through warfare with non-Roman tribes. Chronic debt, alcoholism, or mental incompetence could cause even native Romans to become slaves, and in some cases, parents who could not afford to raise their own children sold them into slavery.

This situation changed after the Third Punic War. Rome's succession of military conquests brought tens of thousands of captive foreigners to Italy as slaves. It then became a mark of status for a Roman to own many slaves and to employ them not only for manual labor but also as skilled workers, musicians, and tutors.

Slaves, of course, resented their condition. They lacked freedom and were forced to labor for someone else's prosperity or pleasure. While some worked for owners who were decent and compassionate, many others endured brutal punishments. Those who worked in mines or as part of agricultural work gangs experienced particularly harsh forms of servitude. At times slaves rebelled. While slave revolts were not frequent, they terrified the Romans and were suppressed with deadly force, much as the Spartans suppressed the helots. The most famous such revolt, led by a gladiator named Spartacus in 73 B.C.E., involved more than 70,000 slaves and lasted two years. Rome sent a succession of legions to crush the uprising, but Spartacus and his forces defeated all of them but the last. In 71 B.C.E. Spartacus was killed, and thousands of his followers were crucified.

Slavery in Rome declined after the string of Roman conquests ended, but it never disappeared as long as Rome lasted. The use of forced labor and the fear of slave revolts remained ingrained in Roman life until the empire collapsed.

Roman women resist male attempts to limit their independence



A contemporary mosaic shows female Roman students wearing togas.

Rome suppresses slave revolts

## Dissatisfaction with the Republic

The Roman ability to adapt and synthesize was put to the test once the Punic Wars ended. The governing system of multiple assemblies advised by a senate had to be restructured to serve the needs of an increasingly complex and extensive empire. A tax system was required to fund a permanent standing army and to pay administrators to govern distant provinces. Otherwise, the senate feared, military leaders might rule those lands and use them as a base for challenging senatorial authority. The senate also hoped to organize the entire Mediterranean basin into a vital center of commerce and manufacturing. Yet this wealth encouraged an opulent lifestyle among the Roman elite and growing resentment among the Roman lower classes.

### Social Discontent and Decline in Popular Rule

The expanding Roman state faced serious social problems. The Punic Wars had laid waste much of the Italian countryside, and since most of Rome's citizen-soldiers were farmers in civilian life, their frequent absences on military campaigns left their families unable to sow and harvest crops. Upon returning home, many veterans sold their devastated or run-down farms to wealthy buyers, who pieced the lands together to form immense private estates. The veterans then worked for inadequate wages in cities, where they competed with slave labor. Their discontent threatened Rome's stability as their plight threatened its defense: only landowners could serve in the army, and given the harm done to the land and the declining number of landowners, Rome's ability to field its famous armies was threatened.

The senate tried to address the problem by dividing some public lands among the poor, but this practice affected only a small number of families. Ominously, generals began accepting propertyless men into the legions, promising them farms upon their retirement. These men were, quite naturally, more loyal to their commanders than to the senate, and many Romans began to think that the senate had lost touch with the needs of the people.

As Rome's domain expanded, the Republic lost control of events. The more territory it occupied, the more borders it had to defend. The greater the burdens of defense became, the more power was delegated to military commanders. The more powerful military commanders became, the less willing they were to take orders from the senate. As this sequence spiraled out of control, the advocates of republican rule found themselves isolated.

In 91 B.C.E. the senate defeated a bill to extend citizenship to all Rome's allies in the Italian peninsula. Many of the disappointed allies revolted, and civil war was waged sporadically until 79 B.C.E., when the Roman general Sulla (*SOO-la*) put down the strife and emerged as **dictator**—a tyrant ruling for the duration of the crisis. His seizure of power effectively ended the Roman Republic, although he tried unsuccessfully to restore it and many of his successors claimed to be loyal to it. But the Republic's usefulness was over: it could no longer control its own generals, as the rise of Sulla indicated, and it had failed to evolve to meet the changing needs of an expanding state. Generals such as Sulla and Pompey, who served in Spain, pretended to bow to the senate's will while effectively ignoring it and making their own policy at the far-flung extremities of empire.

The Roman Republic faces serious social problems

Sulla's dictatorship ends the Roman Republic

## Julius Caesar

With the Republic approaching its end, ambitious generals maneuvered to follow Sulla's lead. After Pompey subdued and colonized Spain, he used that province as a base for advancing his power. Elected consul in 59 B.C.E., he formed a political alliance, the First Triumvirate, with two other prominent generals, Caius Crassus and Julius Caesar. Caesar enjoyed military success in Spain and also in Gaul (today France), which he used as a power base for splitting the Triumvirate. In 48 B.C.E. he defeated Pompey at the battle of Pharsalus. Pompey fled to Egypt and was murdered there. Three years later, Julius Caesar proclaimed himself dictator of Rome.

Julius Caesar ruled Rome for only one year, but he left an enduring mark on world history. Descended from Rome's original aristocracy, he was educated by tutors and studied oratory and rhetoric in Greece. He blended political ambition with military genius in pursuit of his overriding goal: to restore order to the Greco-Roman world. Caesar accomplished a great deal in his one year as dictator: he revised the Roman calendar, made the senate more representative of the citizenry, and gave discharged soldiers and even the urban poor the opportunity to own a bit of land. A masterful literary stylist whose works are still enjoyed two millennia after his death, Caesar spread Roman culture into the lands he helped conquer, such as Spain and Gaul, where he founded colonies. Popular in many quarters for his willingness to implement reforms, he was resented in others for his shrewdness and his betrayal of Pompey. He rewarded his non-Italian supporters with Roman citizenship, ensuring their loyalty but angering many citizens of Rome.

As dictator, Caesar was remarkably magnanimous, granting pardons to many of his opponents and enemies. Within a short time this generosity destroyed him. On March 15, 44 B.C.E. (the famous "Ides of March"), he was stabbed to death in the Roman Forum by several conspirators, two of whom (Gaius Cassius and Marcus Brutus) were among the opponents he had pardoned. Caesar's assassination terminated the brief stability he had created, plunging Rome into renewed civil strife.

## The Birth of the Roman Empire

Caesar's assassination was followed by a struggle for power in which his grandnephew and adopted son Octavian (*ock-TĀ-vē-un*) emerged triumphant. Octavian then reshaped the governing institutions of Rome, molding them into a structure that would support his military dictatorship while seeming to remain republican in nature. As Caesar Augustus, Octavian served as a towering transitional figure between the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire.

## The Rise of Octavian

Caesar's killers were swiftly defeated by his followers, led by the Second Triumvirate: Caesar's eloquent defender Marcus Antonius, immortalized as Marc Antony in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*; the skillful and subtle politician M. Amelius Lepidus; and Octavian, then only 18 years of age. Rome, however, was not large enough for two dynamic leaders such as Octavian and Antony. Lepidus was pushed aside, and Octavian took Rome's western

Julius Caesar's dictatorship moves Rome closer to empire



Tombstone of a Roman soldier.



possessions while Antony took Greece, Egypt, and the east. Caesar had dreamed of uniting Rome and Egypt, hoping to transfer his capital eastward. He had courted the Queen of Egypt, the clever Cleopatra VII, last of the Ptolemaic dynasty that had ruled that land since the death of Alexander the Great. Caesar had acknowledged to friends his paternity of her son Caesarion (*seh-ZAIR-ē-un*), born in 47 B.C.E. Now Antony seemed to have taken Caesar's place, spending the winter of 41–40 B.C.E. with Cleopatra in Alexandria and, in 32 B.C.E., marrying her.

Octavian outmaneuvers the Triumvirate and becomes Caesar Augustus

Octavian resolved to destroy Antony, fearing that if Antony became sole leader of Rome, he and Cleopatra would probably subordinate Italy to Egypt. Cleverly Octavian declared war against Cleopatra rather than Antony, mobilizing Rome's forces in a patriotic struggle to preserve Italian supremacy. Antony and Cleopatra responded by urging eastern princes to fight for their liberation from the tyranny of Rome.

In September 31 B.C.E. Octavian's forces defeated Antony and Cleopatra at the battle of Actium (*ACK-tē-um*). The following year Octavian's armies attacked Egypt itself. Antony, hearing a rumor that Cleopatra had been killed, took his own life by falling on his sword; the Queen of Egypt, after her lover's suicide and her empire's defeat, put an asp to her breast and died from its poisonous venom. Octavian had overcome all his rivals. Returning to Rome in triumph, he was hailed as the man who had ended decades of civil war. In 27 B.C.E. the senate voted him the title **Augustus**, meaning "one who rules with majesty and grandeur." Octavian now called himself Caesar Augustus.

Rome's defeat of Egypt orients its empire eastward

Octavian's victory at Actium shifted Rome's focus toward the east. As Caesar Augustus, Octavian claimed the Egyptian throne and began Egypt's gradual absorption into Roman civilization. Alexandria, which for nearly three centuries had been the world's center of Hellenistic learning and culture, now became subject to Rome. The cultures of the eastern provinces, including Egypt and Syria, were attractive to the Romans. And now with northern Africa and Palestine, Rome's Mediterranean empire was a "Greco-Roman world" and the Mediterranean Sea Rome's *Mare Nostrum* (*MAH-rā NAHS-trum*, "our sea").

## From Republic to Empire

At the time, however, Rome seemed the center of the world, and its governance, following fifteen years of turmoil, was a matter of some concern. Ironically Caesar Augustus, the first Roman Emperor (27 B.C.E.–14 C.E.), hated dictatorial rule and wanted to restore the Republic. Although he tried to reinvigorate republican institutions, especially the senate, most of his political innovations enhanced his own authority.

Augustus consolidates an empire while ruling a republic

As commander of Rome's army, Augustus was called *Imperator*, which after his death evolved into "Emperor." But the term *Imperator* was a military title that said nothing about Augustus's position in civil government. In that sphere he ruled not as king or emperor but as one man holding a broad variety of republican offices. He served a succession of one-year terms as consul, giving him influence over those who served one year only. The senate appointed him to several magistracies and conferred on him powers normally reserved to tribunes. Thus, as consul, he spoke to the people on behalf of the government, while as tribune he spoke to the government on behalf of the people. All these positions were republican, but they were not designed to be held by one man. Augustus made himself emperor in everything but name, and in so doing he transformed Rome into an empire while claiming loyalty to the Republic.

The Roman Empire was a work in progress. Spain, Germany, the Balkan Peninsula, and much of southeastern Europe fell to Augustus's legions. Virtually the entire coastline of the Mediterranean was Rome's, giving substance to the claim of *Mare Nostrum*. Rome's control of the waves eased communication between the empire's remotest regions, overcoming the administrative problems that distance might have created. Augustus also constructed fortified camps and connected them to one another with well-built Roman roads. These camps extended Roman rule and brought Rome's culture to many parts of continental Europe.

The distant regions were inhabited mainly by tribal peoples who spoke Germanic languages and whom the Romans labeled "barbarians." As Rome defeated one tribe after another, Augustus and his successors consolidated their control by offering command positions in Roman armies to the highest-ranking Germanic chieftains and Roman citizenship to some of their most important followers. This systematic use of privilege and citizenship to win over the most powerful Germans helped Rome lay the foundations of a truly multiethnic empire while reducing foreign pressure on its extended borders. The result was the **Pax Romana** (*POCKS rō-MAHN-ah*), or "Roman peace." Until his death in 14 C.E., Augustus presided over a stable and prosperous society.

## Greco-Roman Culture

The *Pax Romana* was founded on a number of interlocking factors: military superiority, Augustus's political skills, the integration of foreigners into the empire, and material prosperity. In addition, **Greco-Roman culture**, rich and attractive, helped keep Roman society stable. Rome's familiarity with Greek culture began through contacts with Greek colonies on the Italian peninsula and on Sicily and continued when Rome conquered Greece. For centuries Rome had envied and attempted to imitate Greek arts and letters, in the process preserving Greek literary and philosophical masterpieces and making them known throughout the immense, multiethnic Roman Empire. This cultural transmission was enhanced by the incorporation into the empire of Egypt, especially Alexandria, where a fabulous library contained many Greek manuscripts. Some Greek philosophical schools, such as the Stoics, appealed to the Romans, who appreciated the Stoic insistence on living in harmony with natural forces. Now the "Augustan Age," or age of Augustus, brought forth a dazzling display of poetry that rivaled anything produced by the Greeks. Much of it sang the praises of the *Pax Romana* and of the ruler who created it.

Virgil, one of Rome's most noteworthy poets, lived from 70 to 19 B.C.E., long enough to enjoy the early years of the age of Augustus. Using a Greek literary form, the epic poem, Virgil in the *Aeneid* (*ih-NĒ-id*) narrates the legend of Aeneas (*ih-NĒ-us*), a Trojan warrior who fled from Troy as the Greeks sacked it. In the legend, Aeneas makes his way to Italy, where he acquaints early Romans with the ancient splendor of Greece. The *Aeneid* provides an alternative creation story for the origins of Rome, shifting the Roman self-image away from the tough and ruthless descendants of Mars who were nursed by a she-wolf and toward the refined and enlightened bearers of Greco-Roman culture. Virgil portrayed Rome as the benefactor of the known world, enlightening barbarian peoples and staunchly upholding Greek ideals of the good, the beautiful, and the true. The *Aeneid* remains, with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, one of the world's great epics.

Rome's skillful use of citizenship helps create the Pax Romana



Caesar Augustus, Emperor of Rome.

Greco-Roman culture helps build the empire

Ovid (*AH-vid*) (43 B.C.E.–ca. 17 C.E.), a generation younger than Virgil, wrote for a less learned audience. He immortalized Rome’s most popular religious and seasonal festivals in verses that nearly everyone who could read could enjoy. But Ovid was surpassed in popular appeal by Virgil’s contemporary Horace (65–8 B.C.E.), whose eloquent, soaring odes praised the accomplishments of Caesar Augustus. All educated Romans, and many learned people since that time, memorized Horace’s stirring lines celebrating Greco-Roman virtues and exalting the heroic victories of the noble Romans over the so-called barbarians. In Virgil, Ovid, and Horace, Rome had a trio of poets whose work, by incorporating Greek themes and styles, immortalized Roman civilization.

The language in which Roman literature was written and in which Roman ideas were spoken was Latin, the language of Latium. Rome’s newly acquired subject peoples continued to speak their own languages, but any who wished to take advantage of Roman contacts had to learn Latin. Gradually, Latin became the common language, first of the educated classes and then of the ordinary people of the Roman Empire. Over centuries, it evolved into many of Europe’s languages, including French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, and Spanish; these are called “romance languages” because of their Roman origins. The dominance of Latin demonstrated that Rome’s conquests were linguistic and cultural as well as military and economic.

The Romans also made permanent contributions to architecture, and Roman building can still be seen not only in Italy, but also in southern France, Spain, and North Africa. Rome went beyond the graceful pillars of Greek architecture to create enormous domed interior spaces, vaulted ceilings, and arches. Central to these innovations was Rome’s invention of concrete, a combination of water, sand, and powdered limestone that provides impressive strength and durability when set. Concrete enabled Romans to create not only buildings of great beauty, but also large sports arenas and utilitarian projects such as bridges and aqueducts. An aqueduct was a long conduit supported by arches that brought fresh water from mountain lakes to lower-lying urban centers, using nothing more than gravity. Many Roman aqueducts still exist two thousand years after their construction, and a few remain in service, a convincing testament to both the durability and the usefulness of Roman architecture.

### Challenges to Augustus’s Work

When Augustus died in 14 C.E., Rome was undisputed master of Europe, the Mediterranean, and much of Southwest Asia (Map 8.4). To Romans, those were the only useful portions of the known world. No other state of the day could challenge Rome’s control of its empire. There were, however, three factors threatening the stability of Augustus’s imperial domain.

First, Augustus himself had never formalized his position within the empire. Insisting that the Republic would one day be restored, he called himself *princeps civitatis* (*PRIN-cheps chi-vē-TAH-tis*), “first citizen of the state,” a modest title that died with him. His other title, *Imperator*, was purely military in nature, but his control over the army was personal rather than institutional. His generals were loyal to him because of his personal attributes. If future emperors lacked such qualities, the army would not hesitate to destroy them and replace them with more suitable candidates—possibly with one of the generals themselves. In short, Augustan rule was personal rather than institutional.

Latin becomes the dominant language of the Roman Empire and of most of Europe



Roman aqueduct, Segovia, Spain.

Augustus’s personal authority cannot be passed on to his successors

### Map 8.4 The Roman Empire, 138 C.E.

The Roman Empire, using the conquests of the Republic as a foundation (Map 8.3), expanded into Britain, Dacia, Cappadocia, Thrace, Judaea, and Mauretania. Note that the extent of the Empire from northwest to southeast was greater than its extent from east to west. Why would this impressive expansion actually weaken Rome's security and place the continued existence of the Roman Empire in jeopardy?



Second, the empire itself had grown too large. Sea travel on the Mediterranean made possible rapid communication between distant points, and Rome's willingness to purchase loyalty with citizenship and privilege helped it hold the borders for many years, even expanding them northward into Britain. But even though the Roman legions constituted an unparalleled fighting force, those borders were too extensive to be held forever by armies of the ancient world. Sooner or later, invaders would press on enough points simultaneously to uncover a weak spot and break through. Skilled leadership could delay but not prevent eventual collapse.

Rome confronts challenges to imperial rule



Finally, Rome's expansion and multiethnic diversity brought it into contact with monotheism, or belief in a single god, which differed substantively from the traditional Roman polytheistic religion. As the new religious beliefs spread throughout the empire, they presented significant challenges to the core values of the Roman world.

## Roman Religion and the Rise of Christianity

Rome's original belief system reflected what it regarded as the civic virtues of tolerance and cultural pluralism, in which various conquered societies were permitted to retain their own cultures. Roman polytheism also permitted the gods of the conquered to be incorporated into the larger pantheon of Roman deities. Monotheism, however, is by its very nature intolerant of what it considers "false gods." The monotheistic religions of Judaism and Christianity, at first merely irritating to the cosmopolitan Romans, actually represented serious challenges to a belief system that had served the Romans well.

### Rome's Polytheistic Religion

The religion of Rome, like that of most other ancient cultures, was polytheistic. Its principal gods, such as Jupiter, Juno, Mars, Neptune, and Bacchus, presided over a great many lesser deities, each identified with some natural or human-made force: Mars was the god of war, Neptune of the sea, and Bacchus of wine. Each god had his or her personal cult of devotions and rituals. If the proper ceremonies and sacrifices were offered, the god was appeased and would bless and protect the worshipper. Those who ignored the gods earned their wrath, expressed in the form of natural disasters and personal tragedies. Roman religion was another manifestation of fundamental Roman practicality, based not so much on morality as on a contractual relationship with the gods. Those who fulfilled the contract would be rewarded with good fortune on earth.

Today this sort of religion is often termed "pagan," but actually it served Rome's complex, sophisticated society well, constituting yet another example of the adaptability of Roman culture. In particular, polytheism's tolerance for previously unfamiliar gods enabled the empire to assimilate conquered peoples without forcing them to abandon their beliefs. It was easy for Rome to integrate the religious beliefs and practices of the people it conquered. Foreign gods, such as Mithras of Persia and Osiris of Egypt, were simply added to the Roman array of deities after their native lands were conquered. All that was expected was that conquered peoples would be courteous enough to respect the festivals of the principal Roman gods, such as Jupiter, thereby appeasing those gods and deflecting their wrath from Rome.

### Jewish Resistance and Eastern Cults

When Rome overran Judaea in the eastern Mediterranean region, however, it discovered that the Jews, who believed in a single, all-powerful God, were intolerant of all other belief systems and unwilling to participate in Rome's rituals. Perplexed by this conduct, the Romans isolated the Jews, a policy that worked fairly well, since the Jews considered themselves the **Chosen People** and prized their separateness. They had no interest in

Polytheism and monotheism embrace conflicting values



Tellus, the Earth, sits with infants and animals, surrounded by personifications of the Four Winds in this relief from the Altar of Peace in Rome.

converting Romans to their own faith and simply wanted to be left alone; the more militant among them hoped that Rome would someday be overthrown or simply go away.

The intolerance of the Jews irritated the Romans, and Roman rule embittered the Jews, who revolted on the death in 4 B.C.E. of Herod, a puppet king whom Rome had elevated from among the Jewish people. Augustus sent his legions to put down the insurrection and replaced Herod with an official who reported directly to the *Imperator*. After suppressing the revolt, Rome attempted to make peace with the Jews by assigning responsibility for Jewish religious matters and local affairs to the Sanhedrin (*san-HED-rin*), the highest Jewish judicial body.

Nevertheless, Jews continued to resist Roman domination, and especially the taxes that Augustus imposed in order to pay for the Roman legions permanently stationed in Judaea. Some Jewish sects, advocating direct action, not only refused to pay taxes but also engaged in serious though futile efforts to dislodge the Romans. Best known among these groups were the Zealots (*ZELL-uts*), who practiced terrorism and assassination not only against Romans but also against Jews who collaborated with the occupying legions. Other sects revived the traditional Jewish prophecies of the coming of a Messiah who would liberate God's Chosen People from earthly oppression—in this case, from the Roman Empire. John the Baptist, a desert preacher, prophesied that the arrival of the Messiah was near. In contrast to these groups, Jewish apocalyptic sects such as the Essenes (*ESS-ēnz*) concluded that the world would end soon and that pious people should withdraw from public life and prepare for the end.

Simultaneously, interest in eastern mystery religions was spreading across the Roman Empire, affecting not only Jews but polytheists as well. Alexander's conquests had acquainted Greeks with eastern cults that promised personal immortality through the sacrifice of a god who had died and risen from the dead. Mystery cults became widely popular in Greece and the eastern Mediterranean region. Rome's absorption of Hellenism spread familiarity with those cults to all parts of the empire, including Judaea. It was in Judaea that Jesus of Nazareth preached.

**JESUS OF NAZARETH.** Born around 4 B.C.E. in Jerusalem, Jesus was raised in the town of Nazareth in the Zealot stronghold of Galilee and was thoroughly familiar with the apocalyptic predictions of the Essenes. But as a man of peace, he disagreed with the Zealots, and his teachings regarding how to live in this world, rather than only preparing for the next, also distinguished him from the Essenes. Jesus, who declared that he did not intend to change Jewish law, was permitted to preach in the synagogue. Like the great Jewish rabbi Hillel (30 B.C.E.–9 C.E.), with whose teachings he was undoubtedly familiar, Jesus taught in texts such as the Sermon on the Mount (see “Excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount”) that Jews must love one another as they loved God and treat others as they themselves wished to be treated. A small group of his followers thought he was the Messiah, and Jesus reportedly revealed himself to them as exactly that. But he did not intend to destroy the Roman Empire; he sought to establish a spiritual kingdom, not a political one.

Jesus's emphasis on the spirituality of his rule disappointed those Jews who hoped that the Messiah would deliver them by force from Roman bondage. Other aspects of Jesus's teachings alarmed more traditional Jews, particularly those closely connected with the Sanhedrin. To them, Jesus appeared as a radical reformer threatening their established place within the Jewish hierarchy or as a troublemaker who might provoke their Roman rulers.

Jews and Romans  
mistrust one another

Eastern mystery cults  
spread throughout the  
Roman Empire



Excavations at Qumran,  
northwest of the Dead  
Sea, reveal how the  
Essenes lived around  
150 B.C.E.

## Document 8.2 Excerpt from the Sermon on the Mount

Soon after the beginning of his public ministry in 26 C.E., Jesus of Nazareth spoke from a mountain to a large crowd. His address, as recounted in the Gospel of St. Matthew, has become known as the Sermon on the Mount. It contains many of his most fundamental teachings.

And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him.

Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying,

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.

“Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you . . .

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’

“But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.

“If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also.

“And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two.

“Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’

“But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,

“that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust . . .

And so it was, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His teaching . . .

SOURCE: *The Holy Bible*, The New King James Version (1983), Matthew 5: 1–12 and 38–45, 7:28.

Jesus of Nazareth challenges orthodox Judaism

There was nothing politically revolutionary in Jesus’s thought, but he was clearly an unsettling figure within Judaism. Pontius Pilate (*PUNCH-us PI-lut*), Roman procurator of Judea from 26 to 36 C.E., a tough former legionary turned political official, was indifferent to Jewish religious quarrels and concerned solely with the maintenance of peace and order. The crowds acclaiming Jesus in Jerusalem during the Jewish Passover festival in 29 C.E. alarmed him. To avert civil unrest and possible riot and bloodshed, Pilate condemned Jesus to death by crucifixion.

## Paul of Tarsus and the Spread of Christianity

After Jesus' death, the unrest subsided in Jerusalem, where his disciples continued to live. Pilate did not attempt to suppress them, assuming they were just another of the many different Jewish cults. As rumors began to circulate that Jesus had risen from the dead, however, his followers grew increasingly outspoken. They came to be known as Christians, or those who believe that Jesus was the Christ (a Greek word meaning Messiah).

The head of the Christian sect was Peter, a Galilean follower of Jesus and a man of traditional Jewish beliefs who felt that Jesus' teachings were meant exclusively for Jews. The new sect therefore continued to observe Jewish laws and customs, accepting only circumcised males and people who obeyed Jewish dietary regulations. To these it added new practices such as baptism (in which new members were sprinkled with or immersed in water as a symbol of new spiritual birth) and communion (at which believers consumed bread and wine in commemoration of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples). Without Paul of Tarsus, Peter's sect might have remained a purely Jewish offshoot, ignored by mainstream Jews.

Paul of Tarsus (a town in what is today Turkey) was a Jewish Roman citizen fluent in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. He helped persecute Christians until, while traveling from Tarsus to Damascus in Syria around 31 or 32 C.E., he experienced a vision that convinced him of the truth of Christian belief. Paul promptly converted to Christianity and, noting that the sect was largely ignored by mainstream Jews, decided to proclaim it to non-Jews, whom the Jews called Gentiles. He taught that Judaism was essentially preparation for the arrival of the Messiah, who by his coming had fulfilled the ancient prophecies and inaugurated a new age. Paul proclaimed that Jesus was not only the Messiah but also the Son of God, and that his teachings were meant for all people on earth.

Traveling and preaching throughout Greece, Turkey, Syria, and Palestine, Paul spread Christianity among the Gentiles. Many, familiar with eastern mystery religions, embraced the new religion. They were drawn to its forgiveness of sinners who repented, its promise of personal immortality, its emphasis on community, its inclusiveness (for example, treating women and slaves as the spiritual equivalents of free men), and its message that each individual had a part to play in the completion of God's work on earth. A small, physically unimpressive man, Paul was a compelling preacher whose devotion and intensity inspired many conversions.

Paul's decision to preach to the Gentiles transformed Christianity from a minor Jewish sect into a distinct and dynamic new religion. Insisting that male converts should not have to endure the Jewish rite of circumcision (the Greeks considered circumcision a form of mutilation), he made it possible for people to become Christians without first becoming Jews. Soon Gentile communities of Christians were larger than the original community of Christians in Jerusalem, which persisted in vainly attempting to convince other Jews that the Messiah had come. When Judaea revolted against Rome in 66 C.E., the Christianized Jews were accused of collaborating with the Romans, and by the close of the first century it was apparent that Christianity's future lay solely with the Gentiles.

Paul's vision of Christianity as a religion speaking to all humanity distinguished the new faith not only from Judaism but also from the other mystery religions. It gave Jesus's message a universal character rather than limiting it to one ethnic group selected by God. The only initiation required was baptism. Within the Roman Empire, Christianity began to challenge polytheism, offering converts a sense of mission and a place in God's plan for the redemption of the world. It also, of course, offered a powerful reward that

Paul preaches  
Christianity to the  
Gentiles

Paul's teachings give  
the message of Jesus a  
universal appeal



polytheists considered absurd: eternal life. In time, Christianity's strong appeal and consequent spread transformed the Roman Empire, and the teachings of a Galilean preacher became the foundation of one of the principal religions of the world.

**ROME'S VIEW OF CHRISTIANITY.** Traditional Roman religion, with its intricate rituals and great range of deities, continued to serve most of the empire's citizens. But Rome's integration of the eastern Mediterranean made it relatively easy for Christianity to spread throughout the region. Paul traveled along well-established trading routes to Greece and Anatolia, while other missionaries carried the new faith to Syria and Egypt. In the northern and western reaches of the empire, however, Christianity encountered indifference bordering on hostility. By 250 C.E. fewer than 10 percent of Romans were Christian.

Nevertheless, imperial authorities were suspicious of Christianity. Its practitioners owed their allegiance to a king who, although his kingdom was spiritual, seemed to rival the emperor. In addition, unlike the public Roman rituals, Christian ceremonies were conducted privately, appearing to be secret and thus potentially subversive. Finally, Christians' intolerance of all other gods and refusal to offer sacrifices to the official Roman pantheon—including deceased emperors, whom Romans openly worshiped—threatened the stability of the state.

By the reign of the Emperor Nero (54–68 C.E.), Christianity had become enough of an annoyance within Rome itself to provoke this unstable and incompetent ruler to atrocities and persecutions. Between 64 and 312 C.E. several imperial persecutions consigned Christians to martyrdom by fire, beheading, crucifixion, or mauling by wild beasts. Sometimes Christians were slaughtered in front of tens of thousands of spectators in the Colosseum, a large stadium in Rome. Those who died during persecutions were considered by Christians to be holy martyrs. Their memories were honored and their heroism used to spread the new religion even further. But as long as the force and power of the state remained arrayed against it, Christianity could never attract more than a small minority of Romans.

Rome becomes suspicious of Christianity



St. Mamai of Georgia, a Christian martyred by the Romans, is shown with a cross in one hand while riding a lion, symbolizing his triumph over death and ignorance.

## From Golden Age to Disarray

Nero's relentless pursuit of Christians did not obscure his inadequacies as a ruler. He was so ineffectual that the army ousted him in 68, and two years of political turmoil were finally ended by the triumph of Vespasian (*vess-PĀ-zē-un*), a general who abandoned all pretenses of ruling a republic and openly established his own imperial dynasty, the Flavians (*FLĀ-vē-uns*).

The next century was the golden age of Rome. By 180 the emperor had come to be recognized as a guarantor of peace, stability, and prosperity. An enormous commercial network integrated the entire Mediterranean basin and attracted trading partners from Asia and Africa. After 180, however, a combination of epidemic disease, political incapacity, and external pressures weakened the empire and left its continued existence in doubt.

## Commercial Connections

Economic prosperity made it grand to be a Roman citizen during the golden age. The city of Rome itself was exciting. Noisy and cosmopolitan, with a multiethnic population exceeding 600,000, it was the most impressive European city of its time. All citizens received free grain, wine, and oil; those who were not citizens were fed at low, government-subsidized prices. Chariot races, gladiatorial combats, and other athletic contests provided entertainment.

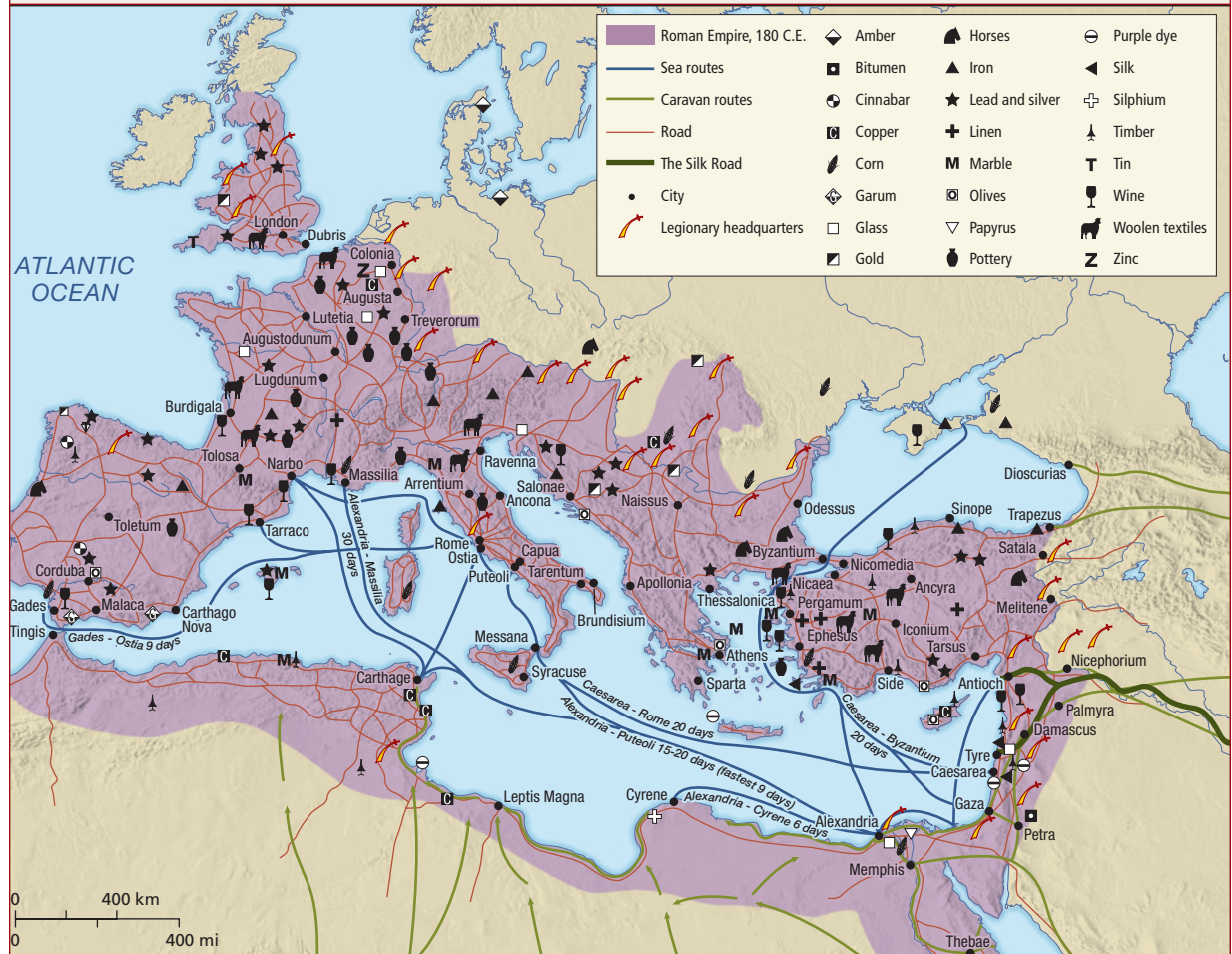
Rome's golden age brings prosperity to the Mediterranean and connects the Mediterranean to the wider world

Roman economic productivity increased and Roman commerce dominated the Mediterranean world (Map 8.5). The Roman Empire after Augustus developed a productive agricultural system. The number of small farms increased, many of them worked by retired military veterans who settled in the regions where they had been stationed. The result was the cultivation of large expanses of rich farmland in Gaul, Britain, and central and eastern Europe, ensuring Romans an abundant supply of food.

The Romans also built an enormous interconnected area of free trade and transport. They developed a system of paved, well-maintained roads connecting Rome to all parts

### Map 8.5 Rome's Economic Organization of the Mediterranean World, 180 C.E.

The economic linkages forged by Rome united the Mediterranean world into an enormously powerful economic engine. Roman roads, most of them paved with stone, linked cities throughout the empire and connected Rome to caravan routes serving Asia and Africa. Notice that the shipping times indicate how rapidly Roman galleys could cross the Mediterranean. Observe also the large number of products listed in the legend, which demonstrates the complexity of trade within the Roman world. But what does the clustering of legionary headquarters in northern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean suggest about the negative aspects of the extent of the Roman Empire?





The Roman Colosseum  
(see page 202).



A modern photo of the Appian Way, part of the network of Roman roads that facilitated travel and commerce throughout the Empire.

“Barracks Emperors”  
weaken the Roman  
Empire

of its vast empire. These ensured the regular flow of goods into and out of the city, and of soldiers to frontiers and trouble spots.

Rome’s provinces were encouraged to trade not only with the capital but also among themselves. Wine from Gaul and Italy, wool from Britain, olive oil from Syria, and grain from Egypt traveled in Roman ships across the Mediterranean, transshipped at ports connected by land routes to the far-flung reaches of the empire. Prosperity and security stimulated the growth of manufacturing, particularly in northern Europe, which grew to rival Italy itself in the production of glass, pottery, brass, and bronze.

Rome’s commercial expansion affected the eastern Mediterranean profoundly. Roman ships cleared the sea of pirates and incorporated it into the empire’s commercial network. In addition, Rome used its eastern lands to launch further contact with the Parthian and Sasanian Empires, which had consolidated the remnants of the Persian and Alexandrian empires. This easterly orientation that began after Actium brought Rome into contact not only with Persian and Macedonian successor states but also with India and China.

In the second century C.E., Roman mariners sailed regularly from ports in Egypt through the Indian Ocean to the Indus River, trading goods of Roman manufacture for the varied wares of the Indian subcontinent, especially fragrant and flavorful spices. Earlier, in the first century B.C.E., Han Wudi, China’s Martial Emperor, had opened the Silk Road between China and the Parthian Empire; in the course of this commerce, Chinese merchants often met their Roman counterparts. Chinese silk and porcelain sold well in Roman markets, and in 96 C.E. China dispatched an ambassador to Roman Syria, where he observed the Greeks and Romans and filed a report of his impressions. But neither Chinese nor Roman rulers concluded that the other civilization had much of interest to offer, and this intriguing set of contacts resulted in nothing that would alter either’s view of the world or of itself.

## The Empire in Disarray

Toward the end of the second century C.E., the golden age of the Roman Empire came to an end. The Flavians and their successors, known as the “five good emperors,” had ruled efficiently and effectively. They kept the army under control, defended the borders of the empire, reformed and revitalized the bureaucracy, and consolidated their own authority. But during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (165–180 C.E.), the last of the “five good emperors,” a deadly epidemic of smallpox drastically reduced the empire’s population, eventually even killing the ruler himself. To make matters worse, the incompetence of his son Commodus soon plunged the empire into civil war.

In 235 the empire fell under the rule of the so-called barracks emperors, a succession of generals who typically gained power by force and quickly lost it the same way. Between 235 and 284 more than twenty different emperors tried to rule. The administrative structure that Augustus had established degenerated into military despotism.

Such developments would have been dreaded even under normal circumstances, but it was Rome’s misfortune that they coincided with intense pressure on its frontiers caused by the migration of the Germanic peoples, whom the Romans called barbarians. In the second and third centuries C.E., some of these Germanic tribes, originating in northern and eastern Europe, began to force their way across the borders of the Roman Empire, attracted by Rome’s prosperity and the fertility of the lands it controlled.

## Chapter Review

### Putting It in Perspective

Rome, which began in the eighth century B.C.E. as a tiny city in the midst of the Italian peninsula, eventually assembled an empire that surpassed the Persian Empire in size and wealth. Victory over Carthage gave the Romans dominance over the Mediterranean basin, enabling them to build an extensive trading network that would spread their goods and influence. However, Rome's republican form of government, which was admirably suited to the proper functioning of a small city-state, could not satisfy the demands of a far-flung seaborne empire. Roman generals contended for the right to exercise political power, and in 27 B.C.E. Octavian eliminated his opponents and became "the first citizen of the state."

As Caesar Augustus, Octavian managed the transition from republic to empire by perpetuating the institutions of the former while employing the broad powers of the latter. But Octavian's successors never created a coherent philosophy of government with which to supplant the Republic, and Rome's golden age eventually degenerated into misrule as military dictators sought unsuccessfully to defend lengthy frontiers.

Rome's genius lay in winning conflicts and forging the cooperative connections that often grew out of them. Its legions stormed across the Mediterranean world, conquering all rivals and dominating the region for centuries. Its rulers brought the lands and peoples they defeated into a multiethnic realm that rewarded ability with citizenship. Romans rarely rejected a good idea, taking the achievements and even the gods of their subject peoples and making them their own. The very extent of the empire ultimately doomed it, but it lasted for centuries.

Benefiting from Roman cultural connections, Christianity spread across the Roman world and eventually grew into one of the most influential of the world's religions. Paul of Tarsus transformed the message of Jesus of Nazareth from the belief system of a small Jewish sect into a compelling faith that

promised salvation and resurrection to all people. Paul's travels and preaching would probably not have been possible had not Rome united the eastern Mediterranean region and had not Paul himself possessed Roman citizenship.

Eventually, however, the Roman Empire's control of the Mediterranean world weakened. The strong leadership of the "five good emperors" gave way after 180 to the military rule of the barracks emperors, which was marked by constant power struggles and assassinations. The Chinese principle of the dynastic cycle explained the inevitability of good rulers being succeeded by bad ones and prescribed a change of dynasties as the proper cure for such troubles. But China was not pressed on all sides by the ambitious invaders who now sensed Rome's weakness and sought to take advantage of it.

### Reviewing Key Material

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#### ASK YOURSELF

1. How did the Roman Republic differ from Athenian democracy? In what ways did the Roman Republic's governing framework respond to the political needs of Romans?



2. How did Rome use citizenship as a tool of governing its pluralistic empire?
3. How was the Roman Republic transformed into the Roman Empire?
4. How did the Roman Empire's organizational structure facilitate the spread of Christianity? What challenges did this new religion present to Rome?
5. Reflect on this statement: "Rome's genius resided in its superb talents for winning conflicts and forging connections."

## GOING FURTHER

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## Key Dates and Developments

### The Roman Republic

**753 B.C.E.** Traditional date for the founding of Rome

**509 B.C.E.** Establishment of the Roman Republic

**494–287 B.C.E.** Struggle of the Orders

**450 B.C.E.** Law of the Twelve Tables

**264–241 B.C.E.** First Punic War

**218–201 B.C.E.** Second Punic War; Hannibal crosses the Alps

**149–146 B.C.E.** Third Punic War; destruction of Carthage

**200–133 B.C.E.** Rome's conquest of the eastern Mediterranean

**91–88 B.C.E.** Conflict between Rome and its allies

**45–44 B.C.E.** Julius Caesar's dictatorship

**March 15, 44 B.C.E.** Assassination of Caesar

**44–42 B.C.E.** The Second Triumvirate defeats Caesar's murderers

**41–30 B.C.E.** Antony and Cleopatra

### The Roman Empire to 284 C.E.

**27 B.C.E.–14 C.E.** Caesar Augustus's rule as *Imperator*  
Conquest of Spain, Germany, southeastern Europe

**ca. 4 B.C.E.** Birth of Jesus of Nazareth

**29 C.E.** Crucifixion of Jesus in Jerusalem

**45–58 C.E.** Paul of Tarsus: preaching Christianity in the eastern Mediterranean

**54–68 C.E.** Misrule of Emperor Nero

**69–180 C.E.** Rome's Golden Age

**235–284 C.E.** Rule of the "barracks emperors" Onset of the Germanic migrations