



THE RISE OF THE
ROMAN
EMPIRE

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THE ROMAN EMPIRE arose out of the remains of the Roman Republic. The republic arose from a group of villages that coalesced into a city-state similar to those of Greece. Initially the Romans were not the dominant force in Italy. The Etruscans, a more powerful neighbor, controlled the Romans and around 600 BC¹ forced upon them a lineage of kings, the Tarquins. Around 500, the Romans overthrew these kings and established a republican form of government. Their system had checks and balances such as two executive/military leaders called consuls and a senate made up of members of the leading families (Patricians) of Rome. In an attempt to limit individual power, consuls served only one year.

The limitation of this early

Below: Overview of Tarquinia, which was one of the largest Etruscan cities. From it came a line of kings, the Tarquins, who ruled over the Romans.

Right: Bronze figurine of an Etruscan soldier, about four inches tall; the youthful soldier's helmet has cheekpieces that frame his face. He wears a tunic beneath a cuirass (breastplate). A sheathed sword is under his right arm. His left hand is pierced to hold an object, probably a spear; 3rd cent. BC.

Right: Bust of Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, who were brothers who worked on behalf of the poor in Rome. They attempted to redistribute land that belonged to the wealthy and give it to the working poor. Wealthy land owners, including those in the Senate, resisted their efforts.



PUBLIC DOMAIN

system was that the ordinary people (Plebeians) had no voice in the government. This situation caused tension between the Patricians and the Plebeians throughout the republican period. The Plebeians gradually gained more rights and participation. But power-hungry leaders such as Julius Caesar used this societal division to further their own ambitions.²

beneath a cuirass (breastplate). A sheathed sword is under his right arm. His left hand is pierced to hold an object, probably a spear; 3rd cent. BC.



After becoming a republic, Rome was forced to fight its neighbors in Italy. This began with the Etruscans and lasted until, by the mid-third century, Rome controlled the whole of Italy. Rome adopted a policy of making these former enemies into allies, granting them at least limited Roman citizenship. This policy increased the available manpower for Rome's military.³

Having exerted control in Italy, Rome began to expand into the Mediterranean world. This led to the greatest external challenge that the republic would face, the city of Carthage (in modern-day Tunisia, North Africa). Before the rise of Rome, Carthage had been the most powerful city of the Mediterranean. Carthage and Rome first came into conflict over Sicily. This led to three wars called the Punic Wars, which lasted 264-146.

The second Punic War (218-201) was the closest that the Romans came to extinction in the period of the republic. The Carthaginian general Hannibal left Spain with a large army and crossed the Alps into northern Italy. He summarily defeated the Roman army sent to challenge him. Rome

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ WALTERS ART MUSEUM/ BALTIMORE (75/0119)





Overlooking the Alps in northern Italy.

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Left: Carthaginian shekel depicting Hannibal on the obverse and a Carthaginian soldier riding an African elephant on the reverse. Rome thought

the Alps provided a natural barrier that kept their northern border secure. In 218 BC, though, General Hannibal of Carthage led his army, which

included cavalry and African elephants, through the Alps and into northern Italy. Many consider it to be one of the greatest feats in military history.

sent a second army, which he also destroyed. As Hannibal moved south, he wiped out a third army in the now-famous Battle of Cannae.

Rome then raised an army led by Fabius Maximus Verrucosus; he adopted a stalling strategy, keeping his army between Hannibal and Rome. In the meantime, Rome had sent an army to Spain, which was a Carthaginian territory. Rome's general Scipio overcame earlier Roman defeats and took control of Spain.

Scipio then invaded North Africa. Hannibal was summoned home to defend Carthage. Rome's military finally defeated Hannibal in the Battle of Zama, and the Second Punic War was over. Rome found itself the dominant power in the western Mediterranean and launched out against other territories in the west and east.

In the next half-century, three events occurred that greatly increased the geographical footprint of Rome. Rome gained control of Macedonia and Greece. In 146, Rome again fought and utterly destroyed Carthage and sold the survivors into slavery. Having no heirs, the ruler of Pergamum left his kingdom to Rome thus opening the door to the eastern Mediterranean.⁴

Meanwhile the situation in Rome itself was chaotic. The large infusion of slaves and wealth created a slave-based society. Many slaves worked on large estates owned by the wealthy, including several in the Senate. Smaller farmers could not compete with these larger estates, and many lost their land to the wealthy. These landless farmers made their way to Rome and became a permanent

class of landless poor. The situation introduced a new kind of politics, conflict between the wealthy and the poor. The poor became pawns for various factions in the Senate. Reformers wanted a redistribution of land while the wealthy wanted to preserve their position. This conflict led to the assassinations of the famous Gracchii brothers who lobbied for the poor. Factionalism continued to expand.⁵

At the same time, a crisis emerged in the Roman military. The army had been drawn from the smaller landowners. Non-landowners were not allowed to serve. Suddenly, not as many men were available for service. Additionally, Rome was facing new enemies. The Numidians in North Africa led by King Jugurtha came into conflict with Rome (112-106).



Artist Laureys A. Castro's 1672 painting of the Battle of Actium, which occurred Sept. 2, 31 BC.



PUBLIC DOMAIN

Above, left to right: Bust of General Pompey.

Gaius Marius (157–86 BC) served as a military general and political statesman for the republic. He reorganized the army and ultimately helped Rome transition from a republic to an empire. While second-in-command of the Roman army in Africa, he defeated the Numidians. Julius Caesar was a nephew of Marius's wife.

Scipio, who was a Roman general who helped con-

quer Spain. **Cornelius Sulla (ca. 138–78 BC)** attempted, through a series of civil wars, to gain control of the republic. He fought against King Mithradates of Pontus in northern Anatolia. He also declared himself dictator over Rome.

Marcus Licinius Crassus (115–53 BC) was considered the richest man in Rome. He was both a military general and a politician; he also assisted in transitioning Rome from a republic to an empire.

POMPEY, GAUL MARIUS, CORNELIUS SULLA, MARCIUS LICINIUS CRASSUS: PUBLIC DOMAIN
SCIPIO: ISTOCK PHOTO

Rome's armies sent to challenge Jugurtha were able to defeat him only after an ally betrayed him.

In roughly the same time period, the Romans encountered resistant Germanic tribes, the Teutones and Cimbri, in southern France. The two tribes defeated multiple Roman armies, but did not invade Italy itself. After being defeated at the Battle of Arausio (105), Rome set out to reorganize its armies. This task fell to Gaius Marius, who totally reorganized the structure and tactics of the army. He also began enlisting soldiers from the lower classes. This was the beginning of a professional army, where their loyalty was to their generals rather

than the state. This new army was able to defeat both the Teutones (102) and the Cimbri (101).⁶

General Marius became the first in a series of general/politicians who finished the transition from republic to empire. He served as consul an unprecedented seven times. His final consulship came at the end of the Social War (90-88) in which many of Rome's oldest allies rebelled against abuses by the Senate. The Senate finally granted full citizenship to all Italians living south of the Po River. Following this war, Marius, who had played a major role, sought command of the army going to Pontus to fight Mithridates.

The Senate, however, had appointed Cornelius Sulla to that command. Sulla led his army to Rome, exiled Marius (87), and went to Pontus to fight Mithridates. His army returned in 82 to find Marius had reasserted control and purged a number of opponents before dying. Sulla again invaded Rome, carried out his own purges against the supporters of Marius, declared himself dictator, and enacted a number of reforms aimed at strengthening the Senate. He then retired to private life in 79.⁷

Three new men soon dominated Rome. First was Marcus Licinius Crassus, a wealthy Roman, who had been instrumental in defeating

the slave army of the gladiator Spartacus. Second was Gnaeus Pompey, a prominent general during the time of Sulla. Third was Julius Caesar, who had been consul in 59 and had been a successful governor of Spain as well. He negotiated an arrangement between Crassus, Pompey, and himself to establish the First Triumvirate, which was an unofficial coalition between the three rulers.

Crassus, seeking glory, took an army east to conquer the Parthians. The Parthians, though, destroyed the Roman army and killed Crassus at the Battle of Carrhae. Caesar and Pompey began to drift apart. Caesar went to Gaul as governor and then began his famous conquest of Gaul,

which made him more powerful and wealthy. Pompey remained at Rome and became increasingly tied to Caesar's enemies.⁸

In 49, these enemies tried to force Caesar to return to Rome and face trial. Defying the Senate, Caesar instead brought his army into Rome. Not prepared to fight Caesar, Pompey and his allies fled to Greece and raised an army. Caesar pursued Pompey, defeating him at the Battle of Pharsalus (48). Pompey fled to Egypt, where he was assassinated at Alexandria.⁹

By 45, Caesar had full control over the Roman state. His enemies, however, were still active. Caesar was assassinated by a group of senators in 44. Caesar's death brought a

Second Triumvirate composed of Mark Antony (Caesar's lieutenant), Octavian (Caesar's great-nephew and adopted son), and Aemilius Lepidus (an ally of Caesar). They quickly purged thousands of adversaries who were friendly to the assassins or just opposed to them. Octavian and Antony led an army into Greece in pursuit of Caesar's assassins, defeating them at Philippi (42).

The three divided Rome's territories. Antony took the entire east; Lepidus took North Africa; and Octavian took Italy, Gaul, and Spain. The situation did not last. Lepidus was cast out first, defeated by Octavian. Conflict between Octavian and Antony was lengthier and more difficult. Antony, who had allied himself with Egypt's queen Cleopatra, was defeated at the naval battle of Actium (31). Antony and Cleopatra fled to Egypt where they both committed suicide.¹⁰

With Antony dead, Octavian, who became known as Augustus, was in total control. And although

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE (120/B/0975)



Constructed 44-29 BC, the Roman Senate building, or Curia Julia, has survived mostly intact. A portico previously extended across the front of the building and to

the left. The holes where the structures joined are still visible across the front. Julius Caesar began the construction work; Caesar Augustus completed it after Julius Caesar was assassinated.

Below: Relief depicting members of the Roman Praetorian Guard in full battle attire;

measuring about 63x48 inches, the marble relief is from Rome and dates to about AD 51-52.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ JERRY VARDAMAN COLLECTION (29/6/8)



ILLUSTRATOR MAP/ LINDEN ARTISTS/ LONDON



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO (35/85/20)

Augustus maintained the structures of the republic, such as the Senate, the republic was finally dead. Rome had become an empire with an emperor. It was this empire into which Jesus was born and the church was birthed.

Even though the empire became hostile to the church after the middle of the first century AD, its presence and stability benefited the church in the early days.

The Roman roads and freedom of the seas allowed people like Paul to travel freely, bringing the



Left: Coin of King Mithridates VI from Pontus (120–63 BC).

message of Christ to the people throughout the empire. In fact, estimates claim Paul traveled around 10,000 miles preaching the gospel.¹¹

The standardization of laws and government throughout the empire benefited missionaries like Paul, who could use his Roman citizenship to further the work of spreading the gospel. Believers lived in a stable culture with minimal threat. Generally, any problems that arose came from the Jewish community,

who resented the new faith, or from others threatened economically—such as the silversmiths of Ephesus. Otherwise, a Christian might live out his life without persecution. The Roman peace (*Pax Romana*) provided a relatively calm world in which to introduce the message of Christ.

1. Unless indicated otherwise, all dates are BC.
2. James L. Stanfield, "Rome's Transition from Republic to Empire," *National Geographic*, July 31, 2019, www.nationalgeographic.org/news/romes-transition-republic-empire/.
3. "The Roman Empire I: the Rise of Rome," TimeMaps, July 31, 2019, www.timemaps.com/encyclopedia/rise-of-the-roman-empire/.
4. Thomas V. Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 1998), 192–93.
5. "The Roman Empire I: the Rise of Rome," TimeMaps, July 31, 2019, www.timemaps.com/encyclopedia/rise-of-the-roman-empire/.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. "Ancient Rome," History.com, October 14, 2009, www.history.com/topics/ancient-rome/ancient-rome.
9. "The Roman Empire I: the Rise of Rome," TimeMaps, www.timemaps.com/encyclopedia/rise-of-the-roman-empire/; James Lloyd, "Pompey," *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, January 27, 2013, www.ancient.eu/pompey/.
10. "The Roman Empire I: the Rise of Rome," TimeMaps, July 31, 2019, www.timemaps.com/encyclopedia/rise-of-the-roman-empire/.
11. "The Roman Empire in the First Century: Early Christians," PBS, July 31, 2019, www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/christians.html.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS/ THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM/ ANKARA, TURKEY (5/18/13)

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