

2. Rome (509 B.C.E.—476 C.E.)

Geographically, Rome was relatively well-situated. The Alps to the north provided protection from an invasion by land (although, ultimately, not enough). The sea surrounding the Italian peninsula limited the possibility of a naval attack unless a large armada floated across the sea. Yet, although somewhat isolated, Rome was also at a crossroad. It had easy access to northern Africa, Palestine, Greece, and the Iberian Peninsula (modern-day Spain and Portugal), which meant easy access to the rest of the world.

Roman Mythology: More Gods

Like the Greeks, the Romans were polytheistic. (Every time you see a cupid on a Valentine's Day card, you see the impact of Roman mythology on our world today.) Many of their gods were of Greek origin, though appropriately renamed to suit their culture and language.

Social Structure in Rome: Organized and Patriarchal

The social and political structure in the Roman Republic consisted of **patricians** (land-owning noblemen), **plebeians** (all other free men), and slaves. Does this sound familiar? It should. It's very similar to the social structure of ancient Greece. Roman government was organized as a representative republic. The main governing body was made up of two distinct groups: the Senate, which comprised patrician families, and the Assembly, which was initially made up of patricians, but later was opened to plebeians. Two consuls were annually elected by the Assembly. The consuls had veto power over decisions made by the Assembly.

This structure was much more stable than the direct democracies of the Greek polis, in which every male citizen was expected to participate on a regular basis. In a republic, the people have representatives, so they don't have to vote on every issue. This is similar to the constitutional democracy we have in the United States. Everyone in this country votes for representatives, so it's correct to call our system a democracy; however, our representatives in Congress vote on all the major issues, so our system of government is also very much a republic. Indeed, the structure of our government was modeled on the system used in the Roman Republic. Instead of two consuls, though, we have one, known as the president.

Early on, Rome developed civil laws to protect individual rights (in some ways similar to our Bill of Rights). The laws of Rome were codified (remember that the idea of a code was Hammurabi's, in Babylon) and became known as the **Twelve Tables of Rome** (the concept of "innocent until proven guilty" originated here). Later, these laws were extended to an international code that Rome applied to its conquered territories.

The social structure of the Roman family centered on the *pater familias*—eldest male in the family—though women did have considerable influence within their families, with some supervising a family business or family estate. Roman women could own property, as well, but they were, nevertheless, considered inferior to men, just as in Greek society. And, as in Greece, slavery was an important element of the social structure of Rome—at one point, slaves comprised one-third of the population, most of whom came from conquered territories. Although life was difficult for all slaves, generally, those living and working in the cities had better conditions than their country counterparts, and some had the possibility of freedom.

Roman Military Domination: All Directions, All the Time

As Rome expanded, **Carthage**, a city-state in North Africa with powerful ambitions of its own, became its first enemy. It didn't take long for this conflict to escalate into full-fledged wars, which came to be called the **Punic Wars**. These lasted on and off from 264 through 146 B.C.E.

The First Punic War (264–241 B.C.E.) was fought to gain control of the island of Sicily; Rome won this one. The second began in 218 B.C.E. with an attack by **Hannibal**, a Carthaginian general, considered one of the great military geniuses of all time. In an amazing feat, Hannibal led his army all the way to northern Italy, crossed the Alps (on elephants no less!), and surprised the Romans, who were expecting an attack from the south. Hannibal's army destroyed many towns and villages to the north of Rome and were on the verge of destroying Rome. But a Roman army had landed in North Africa, forcing Hannibal to return to Carthage to defend his city. Carthage eventually agreed to sue for peace, and this made Rome the undisputed power in the western Mediterranean. Fifty years later, in 149 B.C.E., the Third Punic War was instigated by Rome. Rome invaded Carthage and burned it to the ground. With Carthage out of the picture, Rome continued its expansion throughout the Mediterranean.

Part of that expansion was to obtain Greece by defeating the Macedonians. The Romans also fought the Gauls to the north and the Spaniards to the west. Warfare aided the spread of Roman culture (which, you'll recall, was linked to Greek culture) throughout much of western Europe and the Mediterranean. To maintain their vast empire, the Romans built an extensive road network and aqueducts, and greatly enlarged their navy.

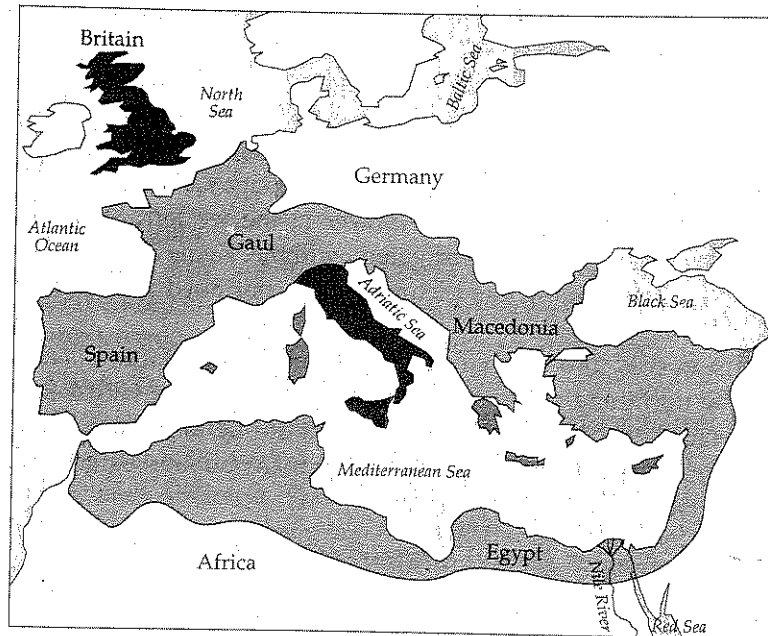
Collapse of the Republic and the Rise of Imperialism

Following the Punic Wars, and even as Roman influence grew, the situation in and around Rome was becoming unsettled. Several events caused this restlessness. First, large landowners had begun using more slaves from the conquered territories. This displaced many small farmers, who moved into the cities, causing overcrowding among the plebeians and not enough jobs to support them. Second, the Roman currency was devalued, causing a high rate of inflation. This meant that the plebeians did not have enough money to buy the things they previously could afford. Third, political leaders began fighting amongst themselves. The result was that the power of the Senate weakened, ultimately to be transferred to three men, who came to be known as the **first triumvirate**: Pompey, Crassus, and Julius Caesar.

Caesar was given power over southern Gaul (France) and other parts of Europe. He chose not to conquer Germany, which would later prove significant. (Germany developed a different culture and would ultimately serve as a training ground for groups intent on conquering Rome.) Civil war between the Senate and Caesar's followers resulted in pushing Pompey and Crassus out of the picture, after which Caesar became "emperor for life." But his life didn't last long. His angry senators assassinated him in 44 B.C.E.

After the death of Julius Caesar, a **second triumvirate**, composed of Octavius, Marc Antony, and Lepidus, came to power. Things didn't improve the second time around. Power again shifted to one person, **Octavius**, who rose to power, assumed the name Augustus Caesar, and became emperor. The days of the Roman Republic were over once and for all. Rome was now an empire led by a single emperor.

Pax Romana: Peace and Prosperity



The Height of the Roman Empire

Under Augustus, Rome became the capital of the western world. Augustus established the rule of law, a common coinage, civil service, and secure travel for merchants. With all these elements in place throughout the empire, stability returned to its people, and for 200 years, they enjoyed a period of peace and prosperity known as the *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace). Interestingly, however, though many of the laws were uniform throughout the empire during this period, a number of traditional customs of the people in the conquered territories survived. This, of course, meant that the distinct groups within the empire, such as the Hebrews or the Egyptians, maintained their individual cultural identities.

Under imperial power, the Roman Empire expanded to its largest geographical proportions through additional military conquests. But more important in the history of the Roman empire was the growth of the arts and sciences during this time. For centuries, Greece had been the arts center of the Western world. With the Roman peace, however, the arts in Rome flourished, especially literature (notably, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Virgil's *Aeneid*) and architecture (marked by the building of the Pantheon, Colosseum, and Forum). Science also reached new heights. Ptolemy looked to the heavens and greatly influenced achievements in astronomy, while Roman engineers went to work on roads and aqueducts.

Compare Them: *Pax Romana* with the Golden Ages of Greece, Gupta, and Others

In case you haven't noticed a pattern, we'll point it out for you. When a major empire greatly expands its territory, it becomes the center of artistic and scientific energy. This is because it has a tremendous amount of wealth flowing into its capital from its conquered regions, and because the people have the freedom and confidence to pursue goals other than military protection. This happened in Rome, Athens, Gupta India, Han China, and the other civilizations we've discussed so far.