The Roman Empire

MAIN IDEA

EMPIRE BUILDING The creation of the Roman Empire transformed Roman government, society, economy, and culture.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The Roman Empire has served throughout history as a model of political organization and control.

TERMS & NAMES

- civil war
- Julius Caesar
- triumvirate
- Augustus
- Pax Romana

SETTING THE STAGE As Rome enlarged its territory, its republican form of government grew increasingly unstable. Eventually, the Roman Republic gave way to the formation of a mighty dictator-ruled empire that continued to spread Rome’s influence far and wide.

The Republic Collapses

Rome’s increasing wealth and expanding boundaries brought many problems. The most serious were growing discontent among the lower classes of society and a breakdown in military order. These problems led to a shakeup of the republic—and the emergence of a new political system.

Economic Turmoil As Rome grew, the gap between rich and poor grew wider. Many of Rome’s rich landowners lived on huge estates. Thousands of enslaved persons—many of whom had been captured peoples in various wars—were forced to work on these estates. By 100 B.C., enslaved persons formed perhaps one-third of Rome’s population.

Small farmers found it difficult to compete with the large estates run by the labor of enslaved people. Many of these farmers were former soldiers. A large number of them sold their lands to wealthy landowners and became homeless and jobless. Most stayed in the countryside and worked as seasonal migrant laborers. Some headed to Rome and other cities looking for work. They joined the ranks of the urban poor, a group that totaled about one-fourth of Roman society.

Two brothers, Tiberius and Gaius (GUY•us) Gracchus (GRAK•us), attempted to help Rome’s poor. As tribunes, they proposed such reforms as limiting the size of estates and giving land to the poor. Tiberius spoke eloquently about the plight of the landless former soldiers:

PRIMARY SOURCE

The savage beasts have their . . . dens, . . . but the men who bear arms and expose their lives for the safety of their country, enjoy . . . nothing more in it but the air and light . . . and wander from place to place to place with their wives and children.

TIBERIUS GRACCHUS quoted in Plutarch, The Lives of Noble Greeks and Romans

The brothers made enemies of numerous senators, who felt threatened by their ideas. Both met violent deaths—Tiberius in 133 B.C. and Gaius in 121 B.C.
A period of civil war, or conflict between groups within the same country, followed their deaths.

**Military Upheaval** Adding to the growing turmoil within the republic was a breakdown of the once-loyal military. As the republic grew more unstable, generals began seizing greater power for themselves. They recruited soldiers from the landless poor by promising them land. These soldiers fought for pay and owed allegiance only to their commander. They replaced the citizen-soldiers whose loyalty had been to the republic. It now was possible for a military leader supported by his own troops to take over by force. Eventually, one would do just that.

**Julius Caesar Takes Control** In 60 B.C., a military leader named Julius Caesar joined forces with Crassus, a wealthy Roman, and Pompey, a popular general. With their help, Caesar was elected consul in 59 B.C. For the next ten years, these men dominated Rome as a triumvirate, a group of three rulers.

Caesar was a strong leader and a genius at military strategy. Following tradition, he served only one year as consul. He then appointed himself governor of Gaul (now France). During 58–50 B.C., Caesar led his legions in a grueling but successful campaign to conquer all of Gaul. Because he shared fully in the hardships of war, he won his men’s loyalty and devotion.

The reports of Caesar’s successes in Gaul made him very popular with the people of Rome. Pompey, who had become his political rival, feared Caesar’s ambitions. In 50 B.C., the senate, at Pompey’s urgings, ordered Caesar to disband his legions and return home.

Caesar defied the senate’s order. On the night of January 10, 49 B.C., he took his army across the Rubicon River in Italy, the southern limit of the area he commanded. He marched his army swiftly toward Rome, and Pompey fled. Caesar’s troops defeated Pompey’s armies in Greece, Asia, Spain, and Egypt. In 46 B.C., Caesar returned to Rome, where he had the support of the army and the masses. That same year, the senate appointed him dictator. In 44 B.C., he was named dictator for life.

**Caesar’s Reforms** Julius Caesar governed Rome as an absolute ruler, one who has total power. However, he started a number of reforms. He granted Roman citizenship to many people in the provinces. In addition, he expanded the senate, adding his friends and supporters from Italy and
other regions. Caesar also helped the poor by creating jobs, especially through the construction of new public buildings. He started colonies where people without land could own property, and he increased pay for soldiers.

Many nobles and senators expressed concern over Caesar’s growing power, success, and popularity. Some feared losing their influence. Others considered him a tyrant. A number of important senators, led by Marcus Brutus and Gaius Cassius, plotted his assassination. On March 15, 44 B.C., they stabbed him to death in the senate chamber.

**Beginning of the Empire** After Caesar’s death, civil war broke out again and destroyed what was left of the Roman Republic. Three of Caesar’s supporters banded together to crush the assassins. Caesar’s 18-year-old grandnephew and adopted son Octavian (ahk•TAY•vee•uh) joined with an experienced general named Mark Antony and a powerful politician named Lepidus. In 43 B.C., they took control of Rome and ruled for ten years as the Second Triumvirate.

Their alliance, however, ended in jealousy and violence. Octavian forced Lepidus to retire. He and Mark Antony then became rivals. While leading troops against Rome’s enemies in Anatolia, Mark Antony met Queen Cleopatra of Egypt. He fell in love with her and followed her to Egypt. Octavian accused Antony of plotting to rule Rome from Egypt, and another civil war erupted. Octavian defeated the combined forces of Antony and Cleopatra at the naval battle of Actium in 31 B.C. Later, Antony and Cleopatra committed suicide.

While he restored some aspects of the republic, Octavian became the unchallenged ruler of Rome. Eventually he accepted the title of Augustus (aw•GUHS•tuhs), or “exalted one.” He also kept the title imperator, or “supreme military commander,” a term from which emperor is derived. Rome was now an empire ruled by one man.

**A Vast and Powerful Empire** Rome was at the peak of its power from the beginning of Augustus’s rule in 27 B.C. to A.D. 180. For 207 years, peace reigned throughout the empire, except for some fighting with tribes along the borders. This period of peace and prosperity is known as the Pax Romana—“Roman peace.”

During this time, the Roman Empire included more than 3 million square miles. Its population numbered between 60 and 80 million people. About 1 million people lived in the city of Rome itself.

**A Sound Government** The Romans held their vast empire together in part through efficient government and able rulers. Augustus was Rome’s ablest emperor. He stabilized the frontier, glorified Rome with splendid public buildings, and created a system of government that survived for centuries. He set up a civil service. That is, he paid workers to manage the affairs of government, such as the grain supply, tax collection, and the postal system. Although the senate still functioned, civil servants drawn from plebeians and even former slaves actually administered the empire.

After Augustus died in A.D. 14, the system of government that he established maintained the empire’s stability.
This was due mainly to the effectiveness of the civil service in carrying out day-to-day operations. The Romans managed to control an empire that by the second century A.D. reached from Spain to Mesopotamia, from North Africa to Britain. Included in its provinces were people of many languages, cultures, and customs.

**Agriculture and Trade**  Agriculture was the most important industry in the empire. All else depended on it. About 90 percent of the people were engaged in farming. Most Romans survived on the produce from their local area. Additional food (when needed) and luxury items for the rich were obtained through trade. In Augustus’s time, a silver coin called a denarius was in use throughout the empire. Having common coinage made trade between different parts of the empire much easier.

Rome had a vast trading network. Ships from the east traveled the Mediterranean protected by the Roman navy. Cities such as Corinth in Greece, Ephesus in Anatolia, and Antioch on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean grew wealthy. Rome also traded with China and India.

A complex network of roads linked the empire to such far-flung places as Persia and southern Russia. These roads were originally built by the Roman army for military purposes. Trade also brought Roman ways to the provinces and beyond.

**The Roman World**

Throughout its history, Rome emphasized the values of discipline, strength, and loyalty. A person with these qualities was said to have the important virtue of *gravitas*. The Romans were a practical people. They honored strength more than beauty, power more than grace, and usefulness more than elegance.
Most people in the Roman Empire lived in the countryside and worked on farms. In Rome and smaller cities, merchants, soldiers, slaves, foreigners, and philosophers all shared the crowded, noisy streets. Here, people from all walks of life came together to create a diverse society.

**Slaves and Captivity** Slavery was a significant part of Roman life. It was widespread and important to the economy. The Romans made more use of slaves than any previous civilization. Numbers of slaves may have reached as high as one-third of the total population. Most slaves were conquered peoples brought back by victorious Roman armies and included men, women, and children. Children born to slaves also became slaves. Slaves could be bought and sold. According to Roman law, slaves were the property of their owners. They could be punished, rewarded, set free, or put to death as their masters saw fit.

Slaves worked both in the city and on the farm. Many were treated cruelly and worked at hard labor all day long. Some—strong, healthy males—were forced to become gladiators, or professional fighters, who fought to the death in public contests. Other slaves, particularly those who worked in wealthy households, were better treated. Occasionally, slaves would rebel. None of the slave revolts succeeded. More than a million slaves lost their lives attempting to gain their freedom.

**Gods and Goddesses** The earliest Romans worshiped powerful spirits or divine forces, called *numina,* that they thought resided in everything around them. Closely related to these spirits were the Lares (LAIR-eez), who were the guardian spirits of each family. They gave names to these powerful gods and goddesses and honored them through various rituals, hoping to gain favor and avoid misfortune.

In Rome, government and religion were linked. The deities were symbols of the state. Romans were expected to honor them not only in private rituals at shrines in their homes but also in public worship ceremonies conducted by priests in temples. Among the most important Roman gods and goddesses were Jupiter, father of the gods; Juno, his wife, who watched over women; and Minerva, goddess of wisdom and of the arts and crafts. During the empire, worship of the emperor also became part of the official religion of Rome.

**Society and Culture** By the time of the empire, wealth and social status made huge differences in how people lived. Classes had little in common. The rich lived extravagantly. They spent large sums of money on homes, gardens, slaves, and luxuries. They gave banquets that lasted for many hours and included foods that were rare and costly, such as boiled ostrich and parrot-tongue pie.

However, most people in Rome barely had the necessities of life. During the time of the empire, much of the city’s population was unemployed. The government supported these people with daily rations of grain. In the shadow of Rome’s
great temples and public buildings, poor people crowded into rickety, sprawling tenements. Fire was a constant danger.

To distract and control the masses of Romans, the government provided free games, races, mock battles, and gladiator contests. By A.D. 250, there were 150 holidays a year. On these days of celebration, the Colosseum, a huge arena that could hold 50,000, would fill with the rich and the poor alike. The spectacles they watched combined bravery and cruelty, honor and violence. In the animal shows, wild creatures brought from distant lands, such as tigers, lions, and bears, fought to the death. In other contests, gladiators engaged in combat with animals or with each other, often until one of them was killed.

During this time of Pax Romana, another activity slowly emerged in the Roman Empire—the practice of a new religion known as Christianity. The early followers of this new faith would meet with much brutality and hardship for their beliefs. But their religion would endure and spread throughout the empire, and eventually become one of the dominant faiths of the world.

**Gladiator Games**

Thumbs up or thumbs down—that is how a match often ended for a gladiator (shown in this mosaic battling a tiger). When one of the combatants fell, the organizer of the games usually determined his fate. A thumbs up sign from him meant that the fighter would live. Thumbs down meant his death.

The crowd usually played a key role in these life-and-death decisions. If the masses liked the fallen gladiator, he most likely would live to fight another day. If not, he was doomed.
Life in a Roman Villa

Much of what we know about Roman homes comes from archaeological excavations of the ancient cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. In A.D. 79, Pompeii and Herculaneum were buried in volcanic ash by a tremendous eruption of Mount Vesuvius. The illustration you see here is modeled after a home in Pompeii. Notice the rich artwork and refined architecture of this home.

RESEARCH WEB LINKS  Go online for more on life in a Roman villa.

The Villa

Very few Romans could afford to live in such luxury, but those who could left a legacy that still inspires wonder.

1 Center of Activity
Owners of such villas were usually noted citizens, and their homes had frequent visitors.

2 Entrance Hall
Beautiful floor mosaics sometimes decorated the villa’s entrance. Skilled artisans created the intricate designs like the one shown in the entry of this home.

3 Kitchen
Well-stocked kitchens kept family members and guests well fed. A dinner from this kitchen might consist of eggs, vegetables, shellfish, meat, cakes, and fruit.
**Frescos**
A fresco is a painting made on damp plaster. Roman artists used this technique to brighten the walls of Roman homes. This fresco from the ruins of Pompeii reflects a couple’s pride at being able to read and write—she holds tools for writing and he a scroll.

**Data File**

**Pompeii**
- Of the 10,000 to 20,000 people who lived in Pompeii, only 2,000 bodies have been uncovered.
- About three-fourths of the city has been excavated.

**Mount Vesuvius**
- Scientists believe there may be a reservoir of magma 400 kilometers (about 249 miles) wide sitting below Mount Vesuvius.
- Today, in the first 15 minutes of a medium-to-large-scale eruption, an area within a 4-mile radius of the volcano could be destroyed—about 1 million people live and work in this area.

**Connect to Today**

1. **Making Inferences** What other types of rooms or activities can you identify in the illustration? See Skillbuilder Handbook, page R10.

2. **Comparing and Contrasting** How are homes today similar to a Roman villa? How are they different?
SETTING THE STAGE  While religion played an important role in Roman society, the worship of Roman gods was impersonal and often practiced without a great deal of emotion. As the empire grew, so, too, did a new religion called Christianity. Born as a movement within Judaism, it emphasized a personal relationship between God and people—and attracted many Romans.

The Life and Teachings of Jesus

Roman power spread to Judea, the home of the Jews, around 63 B.C. At first the Jewish kingdom remained independent, at least in name. Rome then took control of the Jewish kingdom in A.D. 6 and made it a province of the empire. A number of Jews, however, believed that they would once again be free. According to biblical tradition, God had promised that a savior known as the Messiah would arrive and restore the kingdom of the Jews. Roughly two decades after the beginning of Roman rule, many believed that such a savior had arrived.

Jesus of Nazareth  Although the exact date is uncertain, historians estimate that sometime around 6 to 4 B.C., a Jew named Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea. Historical records of the time mention very little about Jesus. The main source of information about his life and teachings is the Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament of the Christian Bible. According to the Gospels, Jesus was raised in the village of Nazareth in northern Judea. He was baptized by a prophet known as John the Baptist. As a young man, he took up the trade of carpentry.

At the age of 30, Jesus began his public ministry. For the next three years, he preached, taught, did good works, and reportedly performed miracles. His teachings contained many ideas from Jewish tradition, such as monotheism, or belief in only one God, loving others, and the principles of the Ten Commandments. Jesus emphasized God’s personal relationship to each human being. He stressed the importance of people’s love for God, their neighbors, their enemies, and even themselves. He also taught that God would end wickedness in the world and would establish an eternal kingdom after death for people who sincerely repented their sins. (Refer to pages 286–287 for more about Christianity.)

A Growing Movement  Some of the Gospels are thought to have been written by one or more of Jesus’ disciples, or pupils. These 12 men later came to be called apostles.
As Jesus preached from town to town, his fame grew. He attracted large crowds, and many people were touched by his message. Because Jesus ignored wealth and status, his message had special appeal to the poor. “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth,” he said. His words, as related in the Gospels, were simple and direct:

**PRIMARY SOURCE**

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you. If anyone hits you on the cheek, let him hit the other one too; if someone takes your coat, let him have your shirt as well. Give to everyone who asks you for something, and when someone takes what is yours, do not ask for it back. Do for others just what you want them to do for you.


**Jesus’ Death** Jesus’ growing popularity concerned Roman leaders. According to the New Testament, when Jesus visited Jerusalem about A.D. 29, enthusiastic crowds greeted him as the Messiah, or king—the one whom the Bible had said would come to rescue the Jews. The Roman governor Pontius Pilate accused Jesus of defying the authority of Rome. Pilate arrested Jesus and sentenced him to be crucified, or nailed to a large wooden cross to die like thousands of other opponents of Rome.

After Jesus’ death, his body was placed in a tomb. According to the Gospels, three days later his body was gone, and a living Jesus began appearing to his followers. The Gospels go on to say that then he ascended into heaven. The apostles were more convinced than ever that Jesus was the Messiah. It was from this belief that Jesus came to be referred to as Jesus Christ. *Christos* is a Greek word meaning “messiah” or “savior.” The name Christianity was derived from “Christ.”

**Christianity Spreads Through the Empire**

Strengthened by their conviction that he had triumphed over death, the followers of Jesus continued to spread his ideas. Jesus’ teachings did not contradict Jewish law, and his first followers were Jews. Soon, however, these followers began to create a new religion based on his messages. Despite political and religious opposition, the new religion of Christianity spread slowly but steadily throughout the Roman Empire.
Paul’s Mission  One man, the apostle **Paul**, had enormous influence on Christianity’s development. Paul was a Jew who had never met Jesus and at first was an enemy of Christianity. While traveling to Damascus in Syria, he reportedly had a vision of Christ. He spent the rest of his life spreading and interpreting Christ’s teachings.

The **Pax Romana**, which made travel and the exchange of ideas fairly safe, provided the ideal conditions for Christianity to spread. Common languages—Latin and Greek—allowed the message to be easily understood. Paul wrote influential letters, called Epistles, to groups of believers. In his teaching, Paul stressed that Jesus was the son of God who died for people’s sins. He also declared that Christian converts were not obligated to follow Jewish law. It was this universality that enabled Christianity to become more than just a local religion.

Jewish Rebellion  During the early years of Christianity, much Roman attention was focused on the land of Jesus’ birth and on the Jews. In A.D. 66, a band of Jews rebelled against Rome. In A.D. 70, the Romans stormed Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple complex. All that remained was a western portion of the wall, which today is the holiest Jewish shrine. The Jewish fortress near Masada (see map at right) held out until A.D. 73. About a half million Jews were killed in the course of this rebellion.

The Jews made another attempt to break free of the Romans in A.D. 132. Another half-million Jews died in three years of fighting. Although the Jewish religion survived, the Jewish political state ceased to exist for more than 1,800 years. Most Jews were driven from their homeland into exile. This dispersal of the Jews is called the **Diaspora**.

Persecution of the Christians  Christians also posed a problem for Roman rulers. The main reason was that they refused to worship Roman gods. This refusal was seen as opposition to Roman rule. Some Roman rulers also used Christians as scapegoats for political and economic troubles.

By the second century, as the **Pax Romana** began to crumble, persecution of the Christians intensified. Romans exiled, imprisoned, or executed Christians for refusing to worship Roman deities. Thousands were crucified, burned, or killed by wild animals in the circus arenas. Other Christians and even some non-Christians regarded persecuted Christians as martyrs. Martyrs were people willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of a belief or a cause.

A World Religion  Despite persecution of its followers, Christianity became a powerful force. By the late third century A.D., there were millions of Christians in the Roman Empire and beyond. The widespread appeal of Christianity was due to a variety of reasons. Christianity grew because it

- embraced all people—men and women, enslaved persons, the poor, and nobles;
- gave hope to the powerless;
- appealed to those who were repelled by the extravagances of imperial Rome;
- offered a personal relationship with a loving God;
- promised eternal life after death.

**Vocabulary**

*Scapegoats* are groups or individuals that innocently bear the blame for others.

**Making Inferences**

Why were the citizens of the Roman Empire so drawn to Christianity?
GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Maps
1. Location Where was Christianity most widespread in A.D. 325?
2. Region What was the extent (north to south, east to west) of Christianity’s spread by A.D. 500?

Constantine Accepts Christianity A critical moment in Christianity occurred in A.D. 312, when the Roman emperor Constantine was fighting three rivals for leadership of Rome. He had marched to the Tiber River at Rome to battle his chief rival. On the day before the battle at Milvian Bridge, Constantine prayed for divine help. He reported that he then saw an image of a cross—a symbol of Christianity. He ordered artisans to put the Christian symbol on his soldiers’ shields. Constantine and his troops were victorious in battle. He credited his success to the help of the Christian God.

In the next year, A.D. 313, Constantine announced an end to the persecution of Christians. In the Edict of Milan, he declared Christianity to be one of the religions approved by the emperor. Christianity continued to gain strength. In 380, the emperor Theodosius made it the empire’s official religion.

Early Christian Church By this time, Christians had given their religion a structure, much as the Roman Empire had a hierarchy. At the local level, a priest led each small group of Christians. A bishop, who was also a priest, supervised several local churches. The apostle Peter had traveled to Rome from Jerusalem and became the first bishop there. According to tradition, Jesus referred to Peter as the “rock” on which the Christian Church would be built. As a result, all priests and bishops traced their authority to him.

Eventually, every major city had its own bishop. However, later bishops of Rome claimed to be the heirs of Peter. These bishops said that Peter was the first pope, the father or head of the Christian Church. They said that whoever was bishop of Rome was also the leader of the whole Church. Also, as Rome was the capital of the empire, it seemed the logical choice to be the center of the Church.
Rome takes over Jewish kingdom.

A Single Voice As Christianity grew, disagreements about beliefs developed among its followers. Church leaders called any belief that appeared to contradict the basic teachings a heresy. Dispute over beliefs became intense. In an attempt to end conflicts, Church leaders tried to set a single, official standard of belief. These beliefs were compiled in the New Testament, which contained the four Gospels, the Epistles of Paul, and other documents. The New Testament was added to the Hebrew Bible, which Christians called the Old Testament. In A.D. 325, Constantine moved to solidify further the teachings of Christianity. He called Church leaders to Nicæa in Anatolia. There they wrote the Nicene Creed, which defined the basic beliefs of the Church.

The Fathers of the Church Also influential in defining Church teachings were several early writers and scholars who have been called the Fathers of the Church. One of the most important was Augustine, who became bishop of the city of Hippo in North Africa in 396. Augustine taught that humans needed the grace of God to be saved. He further taught that people could not receive God's grace unless they belonged to the Church and received the sacraments.

One of Augustine’s most famous books is The City of God. It was written after Rome was plundered in the fifth century. Augustine wrote that the fate of cities such as Rome was not important because the heavenly city, the city of God, could never be destroyed:

PRIMARY SOURCE C
The one consists of those who live by human standards, the other of those who live according to God's will. . . . By two cities I mean two societies of human beings, one of which is predestined to reign with God for all eternity, the other is doomed to undergo eternal punishment with the Devil.

AUGUSTINE, The City of God

While Christianity continued its slow but steady rise, the Roman Empire itself was gradually weakening. Under the weight of an increasing number of both foreign and domestic problems, the mighty Roman Empire eventually began to crumble.

SECTION ASSESSMENT

TERMS & NAMES 1. For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.
- Jesus
- apostle
- Paul
- Diaspora
- Constantine
- bishop
- Peter
- pope

USING YOUR NOTES 2. What event do you think had the biggest impact? Explain.

MAIN IDEAS 3. What did Jesus emphasize in his early teachings?
4. Why did the early Christians face persecution from the Romans?
5. What was the importance of the Nicene Creed?

CRITICAL THINKING & WRITING 6. HYPOTHESIZING Do you think Christianity would have developed in the same way if it had arisen in an area outside the Roman Empire? Explain.
7. FORMING AND SUPPORTING OPINIONS Who did more to spread Christianity—Paul or Constantine? Why?
8. ANALYZING ISSUES Why do you think Roman leaders opposed the rise of a new religion among their subjects?
9. WRITING ACTIVITY RELIGIOUS AND ETHICAL SYSTEMS Imagine you are a resident of Judea during the time of Jesus. Write a letter to a friend in Rome describing Jesus and his teachings.

CONNECT TO TODAY OUTLINING A SPEECH
Locate a recent speech by the pope or the leader of another Christian church and outline its main ideas. Then read some of the speech to the class and discuss its main points.