

Ancient Rome – Lecture Notes



By Roke:

https://www.mpm.edu/sites/default/files/images/content/collections/lamps/Roman_Republic_Empire_map_0.gif Animated map showing the rise and decline of the Roman Empire (Roke, 2006).

Key:

- Roman Republic (510 BCE – 40 BCE)
- *Imperial Rome (20 CE - 360 CE)*
- *Eastern Roman Empire (405 CE – 1453 CE)*
- *Western Roman Empire (405 CE – 480 CE)*



Cameo with double portrait of the emperor Trajan and his wife Plotina, c. 105-115 C.E.,
sardonyx, 5 x 4.3 cm (The British Museum)

*Cameo with double portrait of the emperor Trajan and his wife Plotina, c. 105-115 C.E.,
sardonyx, 5 x 4.3 cm, © Trustees of the British Museum*

From a republic to an empire

In legend Rome was founded in 753 B.C.E. by Romulus, its first king. In 509 B.C.E. Rome became a republic ruled by the Senate (wealthy landowners and elders) and the Roman people. During the 450 years of the republic Rome conquered the rest of Italy and then expanded into France, Spain, Turkey, North Africa and Greece.

Rome became very Greek influenced or “Hellenized,” filled with Greek architecture, literature, statues, wall-paintings, mosaics, pottery and glass. But with Greek culture came Greek gold, and generals and senators fought over this new wealth. The Republic collapsed in civil war and the Roman empire began.

In 31 B.C.E. Octavian, the CEopted son of Julius Caesar, defeated Cleopatra and Mark Antony at Actium. This brought the last civil war of the republic to an end. Although it was hoped by many

that the republic could be restored, it soon became clear that a new political system was forming: the emperor became the focus of the empire and its people. Although, in theory, Augustus (as Octavian became known) was only the first citizen and ruled by consent of the Senate, he was in fact the empire's supreme authority. As emperor he could pass his powers to the heir he decreed and was a king in all but name.

The empire, as it could now be called, enjoyed unparalleled prosperity as the network of cities boomed, and goods, people and ideas moved freely by land and sea. Many of the masterpieces associated with Roman art, such as the mosaics and wall paintings of Pompeii, gold and silver tableware, and glass, including the Portland Vase, were created in this period. The empire ushered in an economic and social revolution that changed the face of the Roman world: service to the empire and the emperor, not just birth and social status, became the key to advancement.

Successive emperors, such as Tiberius and Claudius, expanded Rome's territory. By the time of the emperor Trajan, in the late first century C.E., the Roman empire, with about fifty million inhabitants, encompassed the whole of the Mediterranean, Britain, much of northern and central Europe and the Near East.

A vast empire

Starting with Augustus in 27 B.C.E., the emperors ruled for five hundred years. They expanded Rome's territory and by about 200 C.E., their vast empire stretched from Syria to Spain and from Britain to Egypt. Networks of roads connected rich and vibrant cities, filled with beautiful public buildings. A shared Greco-Roman culture linked people, goods and ideas.

The imperial system of the Roman Empire depended heavily on the personality and standing of the emperor himself. The reigns of weak or unpopular emperors often ended in bloodshed at Rome and chaos throughout the empire as a whole. In the third century C.E. the very existence of the empire was threatened by a combination of economic crisis, weak and short-lived emperors and usurpers (and the violent civil wars between their rival supporting armies), and massive barbarian penetration into Roman territory.

Relative stability was re-established in the fourth century C.E., through the emperor Diocletian's division of the empire. The empire was divided into eastern and western halves and then into more easily administered units. Although some later emperors such as Constantine ruled the whole empire, the division between east and west became more marked as time passed. Financial pressures, urban decline, underpaid troops and consequently overstretched frontiers - all of these finally caused the collapse of the western empire under waves of barbarian incursions in the early fifth century C.E. The last western emperor, Romulus Augustus, was deposed in 476 C.E., though the empire in the east, centered on Byzantium (Constantinople), continued until the fifteenth century.

From its founding in 625 BCE to its fall in CE 476, the Roman Empire conquered and integrated dozens of cultures.

The history of the Roman Empire can be divided into three distinct periods: The Period of Kings (625-510 BCE), Republican Rome (510-31 BCE), and Imperial Rome (31 BCE – CE 476).

Founding (c. 625 BCE)

Rome was founded around 625 BCE in the areas of ancient Italy known as Etruria and Latium. It is thought that the city-state of Rome was initially formed by Latium villagers joining together with settlers from the surrounding hills in response to an Etruscan invasion. It is unclear whether they came together in defense or as a result of being brought under Etruscan rule. Archaeological evidence indicates that a great deal of change and unification took place around 600 BCE which likely led to the establishment of Rome as a true city.

Period of Kings (625-510 BCE)

The first period in Roman history is known as the Period of Kings, and it lasted from Rome's founding until 510 BCE. During this brief time Rome, led by no fewer than six kings, advanced both militaristically and economically with increases in physical boundaries, military might, and production and trade of goods including oil lamps. Politically, this period saw the early formation of the Roman constitution. The end of the Period of Kings came with the decline of Etruscan power, thus ushering in Rome's Republican Period.

Republican Rome (510-31 BCE)

Rome entered its Republican Period in 510 BCE. No longer ruled by kings, the Romans established a new form of government whereby the upper classes ruled, namely the senators and the equestrians, or knights. However, a dictator could be nominated in times of crisis. In

451 BCE, the Romans established the “Twelve Tables,” a standardized code of laws meant for public, private, and political matters.

Rome continued to expand through the Republican Period and gained control over the entire Italian peninsula by 338 BCE. It was the Punic Wars from 264-146 BCE, along with some conflicts with Greece, that allowed Rome to take control of Carthage and Corinth and thus become the dominant maritime power in the Mediterranean.

Soon after, Rome’s political atmosphere pushed the Republic into a period of chaos and civil war. This led to the election of a dictator, L. Cornelius Sulla, who served from 82-80 BCE. Following Sulla’s resignation in 79 BCE, the Republic returned to a state of unrest. While Rome continued to be governed as a Republic for another 50 years, the shift to Imperialism began to materialize in 60 BCE when Julius Caesar rose to power.

By 51 BCE, Julius Caesar had conquered Celtic Gaul and, for the first time, Rome’s borders spread beyond the Mediterranean region. Although the Senate was still Rome’s governing body, its power was weakening. Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BCE and replaced by his heir, Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus (Octavian) who ruled alongside Mark Antony. In 31 BCE Rome overtook Egypt which resulted in the death of Mark Antony and left Octavian as the unchallenged ruler of Rome. Octavian assumed the title of Augustus and thus became the first emperor of Rome.

Imperial Rome (31 BCE – CE 476)

Rome’s Imperial Period was its last, beginning with the rise of Rome’s first emperor in 31 BCE and lasting until the fall of Rome in CE 476. During this period, Rome saw several decades of peace, prosperity, and expansion. By CE 117, the Roman Empire had reached its maximum extent, spanning three continents including Asia Minor, northern Africa, and most of Europe.

In CE 286 the Roman Empire was split into eastern and western empires, each ruled by its own emperor. The western empire suffered several Gothic invasions and, in CE 455, was sacked by Vandals. Rome continued to decline after that until CE 476 when the western Roman Empire came to an end. The eastern Roman Empire, more commonly known as the Byzantine Empire, survived until the 15th century CE. It fell when Turks took control of its capital city, Constantinople (modern day Istanbul in Turkey) in CE 1453.