**Ancient Rome**

ancient state, Europe, Africa, and Asia

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Last Updated: May 6, 2021 [See Article History](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Rome/additional-info#history)

**Ancient Rome**, the state centred on the city of [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome). This article discusses the period from the founding of the city and the regal period, which began in 753 BC, through the events leading to the founding of the republic in 509 BC, the establishment of the empire in 27 BC, and the final eclipse of the Empire of the West in the 5th century AD. For later events of the Empire of the East, see [Byzantine Empire](https://www.britannica.com/place/Byzantine-Empire).

Rome must be considered one of the most successful imperial powers in history. In the course of centuries Rome grew from a small town on the [Tiber River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tiber-River) in central Italy into a vast empire that ultimately embraced England, all of continental [Europe](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Europe) west of the Rhine and south of the Danube, most of [Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Asia-ancient-Roman-province) west of the Euphrates, northern Africa, and the islands of the Mediterranean. Unlike the [Greeks](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Greece), who excelled in [intellectual](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intellectual) and artistic endeavours, the Romans achieved greatness in their military, political, and social institutions. Roman society, during the republic, was governed by a strong military [ethos](https://www.britannica.com/art/ethos). While this helps to explain the incessant warfare, it does not account for Rome’s success as an imperial power. Unlike Greek city-states, which excluded foreigners and subjected peoples from political participation, Rome from its beginning incorporated conquered peoples into its social and [political system](https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-system). Allies and subjects who adopted Roman ways were eventually granted Roman citizenship. During the principate (see below), the seats in the [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history) and even the imperial throne were occupied by persons from the Mediterranean realm outside Italy. The lasting effects of Roman rule in Europe can be seen in the geographic distribution of the [Romance languages](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Romance-languages) (Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian), all of which evolved from Latin, the [language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/language) of the Romans. The Western alphabet of 26 letters and the calendar of 12 months and 365.25 days are only two simple examples of the cultural [legacy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/legacy) which Rome has [bequeathed](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bequeathed) Western civilization.

## Rome from its origins to 264 BC

## Early Rome to 509 BC

## Early [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Italy)

When Italy emerged into the light of history about 700 BC, it was already inhabited by various peoples of different [cultures](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultures) and languages. Most natives of the country lived in villages or small towns, supported themselves by agriculture or [animal husbandry](https://www.britannica.com/science/animal-husbandry) (Italia means “Calf Land”), and spoke an Italic [dialect](https://www.britannica.com/topic/dialect) belonging to the Indo-European [family](https://www.britannica.com/topic/family-kinship) of languages. Oscan and Umbrian were closely related Italic [dialects](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialects) spoken by the inhabitants of the Apennines. The other two Italic dialects, Latin and Venetic, were likewise closely related to each other and were spoken, respectively, by the Latins of [Latium](https://www.britannica.com/place/Latium) (a plain of west-central Italy) and the people of northeastern Italy (near modern Venice). Iapyges and Messapii inhabited the southeastern coast. Their language resembled the speech of the Illyrians on the other side of the Adriatic. During the 5th century BC the Po valley of northern Italy(Cisalpine Gaul) was occupied by Gallic [tribes](https://www.britannica.com/topic/tribe-ancient-Rome) who spoke Celtic and who had migrated across the [Alps](https://www.britannica.com/place/Alpes) from continental Europe. The [Etruscans](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Etruscan) were the first highly civilized people of Italy and were the only inhabitants who did not speak an Indo-European language. By 700 BC several Greek colonies were established along the southern coast. Both Greeks and Phoenicians were actively engaged in trade with the Italian natives.

Modern historical analysis is making rapid progress in showing how Rome’s early development occurred in a multicultural [environment](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/environment) and was particularly influenced by the higher civilizations of the Etruscans to the north and the Greeks to the south. [Roman religion](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-religion) was indebted to the beliefs and practices of the Etruscans. The Romans borrowed and adapted the alphabet from the Etruscans, who in turn had borrowed and adapted it from the Greek colonies of Italy. Senior officials of the [Roman Republic](https://www.britannica.com/place/Roman-Republic) derived their insignia from the Etruscans: [curule chair](https://www.britannica.com/topic/curule-chair), purple-bordered toga (toga praetexta), and bundle of rods ([*fasces*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/fasces)). Gladiatorial combats and the military triumph (see below) were other customs adopted from the Etruscans. Rome lay 12 miles inland from the sea on the Tiber River, the border between Latium and Etruria. Because the site commanded a convenient river crossing and lay on a land route from the Apennines to the sea, it formed the meeting point of three distinct peoples: Latins, Etruscans, and [Sabines](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sabine). Though Latin in speech and [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture), the Roman population must have been somewhat [diverse](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diverse) from earliest times, a circumstance that may help to account for the openness of Roman society in historical times

## Historical sources on early Rome

The regal period (753–509 BC) and the early republic (509–280 BC) are the most poorly documented periods of Roman history because historical accounts of Rome were not written until much later. Greek historians did not take serious notice of Rome until the [Pyrrhic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Pyrrhic) War (280–275 BC), when Rome was completing its conquest of Italy and was fighting against the Greek city of [Tarentum](https://www.britannica.com/place/Taranto-Italy) in southern Italy. Rome’s first native historian, a senator named [Quintus Fabius Pictor](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Quintus-Fabius-Pictor), lived and wrote even later, during the [Second Punic War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Second-Punic-War) (218–201 BC). Thus historical writing at Rome did not begin until after Rome had completed its conquest of Italy, had emerged as a major power of the ancient world, and was engaged in a titanic struggle with [Carthage](https://www.britannica.com/place/Carthage-ancient-city-Tunisia) for control of the western Mediterranean. Fabius Pictor’s history, which began with the city’s mythical Trojan ancestry and narrated events up to his own day, established the form of subsequent histories of Rome. During the last 200 years BC, 16 other Romans wrote similarly [inclusive](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/inclusive) narratives. All these works are now collectively termed “the Roman [annalistic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/annalist) tradition” because many of them attempted to give a year-by-year (or annalistic) account of Roman affairs for the republic.

Although none of these histories are fully preserved, the first 10 books of [Livy](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Livy), one of Rome’s greatest historians, are [extant](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/extant) and cover Roman affairs from earliest times to the year 293 BC (extant are also Books 21 to 45 treating the events from 218 BC to 167 BC). Since Livy wrote during the reign of the emperor [Augustus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-Roman-emperor) (27 BC–AD 14), he was separated by 200 years from Fabius Pictor, who, in turn, had lived long after many of the events his history described. Thus, in writing about early Rome, ancient historians were confronted with great difficulties in [ascertaining](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ascertaining) the truth. They possessed a list of annual magistrates from the beginning of the republic onward (the consular [*fasti*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/fasti-Roman-calendar)), which formed the chronological framework of their accounts. Religious records and the texts of some laws and treaties provided a bare outline of major events. Ancient historians fleshed out this meagre factual material with both native and Greek folklore. Consequently, over time, historical facts about early Rome often suffered from patriotic or face-saving reinterpretations involving exaggeration of the truth, suppression of embarrassing facts, and invention.

The evidence for the annalistic tradition shows that the Roman histories written during the 2nd century BC were relatively brief resumes of facts and stories. Yet in the course of the 1st century BC Roman writers were increasingly influenced by Greek [rhetorical](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rhetorical) training, with the result that their histories became greatly expanded in length; included in them were fictitious speeches and lengthy narratives of spurious battles and political confrontations, which, however, reflect the military and political conditions and controversies of the late republic rather than accurately portraying the events of early Rome. Livy’s history of early Rome, for example, is a blend of some facts and much fiction. Since it is often difficult to separate fact from fiction in his works and doing so involves personal judgment, modern scholars have disagreed about many aspects of early Roman history and will continue to do so.

# Rome’s foundation myth

Although Greek historians did not write seriously about Rome until the [Pyrrhic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Pyrrhic) War, they were aware of Rome’s existence long before then. In accordance with their custom of explaining the origin of the foreign peoples they encountered by connecting them with the wanderings of one of their own mythical heroes, such as Jason and the Argonauts, Heracles, or Odysseus, Greek writers from the 5th century BC onward invented at least 25 different [myths](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/myths) to account for Rome’s foundation. In one of the earliest accounts (Hellanicus of Lesbos), which became accepted, the Trojan hero [Aeneas](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Aeneas) and some followers escaped the Greek destruction of [Troy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Troy-ancient-city-Turkey), and, after wandering about the Mediterranean for some years, they settled in central [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy), where they intermarried with the native population and became the Latins.

Although the connection between Rome and Troy is unhistorical, the Romans of later time were so flattered by this illustrious mythical pedigree that they readily accepted it and incorporated it into their own folklore about the beginning of their city. Roman historians knew that the republic had begun about 500 BC, because their annual list of magistrates went back that far. Before that time, they thought, [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome-ancient-kingdom-753-BC-509-BC) had been ruled by seven kings in succession. By using Greek methods of genealogical reckoning, they estimated that seven kings would have ruled about 250 years, thus making Rome’s regal period begin in the middle of the 8th century BC. Ancient historians initially differed concerning the precise date of Rome’s foundation, ranging from as early as 814 BC (Timaeus) to as late as 728 BC (Cincius Alimentus). By the end of the republic, it was generally accepted that Rome had been founded in 753 BC and that the republic had begun in 509 BC.

Since the generally accepted date of Troy’s destruction was 1184 BC, Roman historians maintained Troy’s unhistorical connection with Rome by inventing a series of fictitious kings who were supposed to have descended from the Trojan Aeneas and ruled the Latin town of [Alba Longa](https://www.britannica.com/place/Alba-Longa) for the intervening 431 years (1184–753 BC) until the last of the royal line, the twin brothers [Romulus and Remus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Romulus-and-Remus), founded their own city, Rome, on the [Palatine Hill](https://www.britannica.com/place/Palatine-Hill). According to tradition, the twins, believed to have been the children of the god [Mars](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mars-Roman-god), were set adrift in a basket on the Tiber by the king of Alba; they survived, however, being nursed by a she-wolf, and lived to overthrow the wicked king. In the course of founding Rome the brothers quarreled, and Romulus slew Remus. This story was a Roman [adaptation](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adaptation) of a widespread ancient Mediterranean folktale told of many national leaders, such as the Akkadian king Sargon (c. 2300 BC), the biblical Moses, the Persian king [Cyrus the Great](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Cyrus-the-Great), the Theban king Oedipus, and the twins Neleus and Pelias of [Greek mythology](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Greek-mythology).

## The regal period, 753–509 BC

Romulus, Rome’s first king according to tradition, was the invention of later ancient historians. His name, which is not even proper Latin, was designed to explain the origin of Rome’s name. His fictitious reign was filled with deeds expected of an ancient city founder and the son of a war god. Thus he was described as having established Rome’s early political, military, and social institutions and as having waged war against neighbouring states. Romulus was also thought to have shared his royal power for a time with a Sabine named [Titus Tatius](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Titus-Tatius). The name may be that of an authentic ruler of early Rome, perhaps Rome’s first real king; nothing, however, was known about him in later centuries, and his reign was therefore lumped together with that of Romulus.

The names of the other six kings are authentic and were remembered by the Romans, but few reliable details were known about their reigns. However, since the later Romans wished to have explanations for their early customs and institutions, historians ascribed various [innovations](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/innovations) to these kings, often in stereotypical and [erroneous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/erroneous) ways. The three kings after Romulus are still hardly more than names, but the recorded deeds of the last three kings are more historical and can, to some extent, be checked by archaeological evidence.

According to ancient tradition, the warlike founder Romulus was succeeded by the Sabine [Numa Pompilius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Numa-Pompilius), whose reign was characterized by complete tranquility and peace. Numa was supposed to have created virtually all of Rome’s religious institutions and practices. The tradition of his religiosity probably derives from the erroneous connection by the ancients of his name with the Latin word numen, meaning divine power. Numa was succeeded by [Tullus Hostilius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tullus-Hostilius), whose reign was filled with warlike exploits, probablybecause the name Hostilius was later interpreted to suggest hostility and belligerence. Tullus was followed by [Ancus Marcius](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ancus-Marcius), who was believed to have been the grandson of Numa. His reign combined the characteristics of those of his two predecessors—namely religious innovations as well as warfare.

[Archaeological evidence](https://www.britannica.com/science/archaeology) for early Rome is scattered and limited because it has proven difficult to conduct extensive excavations at sites still occupied by later buildings. What evidence exists is often [ambiguous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ambiguous) and cannot be correlated easily to the ancient literary tradition; it can, however, sometimes confirm or contradict aspects of the ancient historical account. For example, it confirms that the earliest settlement was a simple village of thatched huts on the Palatine Hill (one of the seven hills eventually occupied by the city of Rome), but it dates the beginning of the village to the 10th or 9th century BC, not the mid-8th century. Rome therefore cannot have been ruled by a succession of only seven kings down to the end of the 6th century BC. Archaeology alsoshows that the [Esquiline Hill](https://www.britannica.com/place/Esquiline) was next inhabited, thus disproving the ancient account which maintained that the Quirinal Hill was settled after the Palatine. Around 670–660 BC the Palatine settlement expanded down into the valley of the later [Forum Romanum](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Forum) and became a town of artisans living in houses with stone foundations. The [material culture](https://www.britannica.com/topic/material-culture) testifies to the existence of some trade as well as to [Etruscan](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Etruscan) and Greek influence. Archaeology of other Latin sites suggests that Rome at this time was a typical Latin [community](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community). In another major transition spanning the 6th century the Latin town was gradually transformed into a real city. The swampy Forum valley was drained and paved to become the city’s public centre. There are clear signs of major temple construction. Pottery and architectural remains indicate vigorous trade with the Greeks and Etruscans, as well as local work done under their influence.

Rome’s urban transformation was carried out by its last three kings: Lucius [Tarquinius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tarquin-king-of-Rome-616-578-BC) Priscus (Tarquin the Elder), [Servius Tullius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Servius-Tullius), and Lucius [Tarquinius](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Tarquin-Roman-dynasty) Superbus ([Tarquin](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tarquin-king-of-Rome-534-509-BC) the Proud). According to ancient tradition, the two Tarquins were father and son and came from Etruria. One tradition made Servius Tullius a Latin; another described him as an Etruscan named Mastarna. All three kings were supposed to have been great city planners and organizers (a tradition that has been confirmed by archaeology). Their Etruscan origin is rendered plausible by Rome’s proximity to Etruria, Rome’s growing geographic significance, and the [public works](https://www.britannica.com/technology/public-utility) that were carried out by the kings themselves. The latter were characteristic of contemporary Etruscan cities. It would thus appear that during the 6th century BC some Etruscan adventurers took over the site of Rome and transformed it into a city along Etruscan lines.

# Early centuries of the Roman Republic

## Foundation of the republic

The ancient historians depicted [Rome’s](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome) first six kings as [benevolent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/benevolent) and just rulers but the last one as a cruel tyrant who murdered his predecessor [Servius Tullius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Servius-Tullius), usurped the kingship, terrorized the [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history), and oppressed the common people with [public works](https://www.britannica.com/technology/public-utility). He supposedly was overthrown by a popular uprising ignited by the rape of a virtuous noblewoman, [Lucretia](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lucretia-ancient-Roman-heroine), by the king’s son. The reign of Tarquinius Superbus was described in the stereotypical terms of a Greek [tyranny](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tyranny) in [order](https://www.britannica.com/technology/order-architecture) to explain the major political transition from the monarchy to the republic in accordance with Greek political theory concerning [constitutional](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constitutional) evolution from monarchy to tyranny to [aristocracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aristocracy). This explanation provided later Romans with a satisfying patriotic story of despotism giving way to liberty. It is probably unhistorical, however, and merely a Roman [adaptation](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adaptation) of a well-known Greek story of alove affair in Athens that led to the murder of the tyrant’s brother and the tyrant’s eventual downfall. According to ancient tradition, as soon as the Romans had expelled their last, tyrannical king, Rome was attacked and besieged by the king of the [Etruscan](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Etruscan) city of Clusium, [Lars](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lars-Porsena) Porsenna. The city was gallantly defended by [Horatius Cocles](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Horatius-Cocles), who sacrificed his life in defense of the bridge across the Tiber, and Mucius Scaevola, who attempted to assassinate Porsenna in his own camp. When arrested before accomplishing the deed, he demonstrated his courage by voluntarily burning off his right hand in a nearby fire. As a result of such Roman heroism, Porsenna was supposed to have made peace with Rome and withdrawn his army.

One prevalent modern view is that the monarchy at Rome was incidentally terminated through military defeat and foreign intervention. This theory sees Rome as a site highly prized by the Etruscans of the 6th century BC, who are known to have extended their power and influence at the time across the Tiber into Latium and even farther south into Campania. Toward the end of the 6th century, Rome may have been involved in a war against King Porsenna of Clusium, who defeated the Romans, seized the city, and expelled its last king. Before Porsenna could establish himself as monarch, he was forced to withdraw, leaving Rome kingless. In fact, Porsenna is known to have suffered a serious defeat at the hands of the combined forces of the other Latins and the Greeks of Campanian [Cumae](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cumae). Rather than restoring [Tarquin](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tarquin-king-of-Rome-534-509-BC) from exile to power, the Romans replaced the kingship with two annually elected magistrates (originally called [praetors](https://www.britannica.com/topic/praetor), later [consuls](https://www.britannica.com/topic/consul-ancient-Roman-official)).

## The struggle of the orders

As the Roman state grew in size and power during the early republic (509–280 BC), new offices and institutions were created, and old ones were adapted to cope with the changing military, political, social, and economic needs of the state and its populace. According to the annalistic tradition, all these changes and [innovations](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/innovations) resulted from a political struggle between two social orders, the [patricians](https://www.britannica.com/topic/patrician) and the [plebeians](https://www.britannica.com/topic/plebeian), that is thought to have begun during the first years of the republic and lasted for more than 200 years. In the beginning, the patricians were supposed to have enjoyed a monopoly of power (the consulship, the Senate, and all religious offices), whereas the plebeians began with nothing except the [right to vote](https://www.britannica.com/topic/suffrage) in the assemblies. During the course of the struggle the plebeians, however, were believed to have won [concessions](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/concessions) gradually from the patricians through political agitation and confrontation, and they eventually attained legal equality with them. Thus ancient historians, such as [Livy](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Livy), explained all aspects of early Rome’s internal political development in terms of a single sustained [social movement](https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-movement).

As tradition has it, the distinction between patricians and plebeians was as old as Rome itself and had been instituted by Romulus. The actual historical dating and explanation of this distinction still [constitutes](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constitutes) the single biggest unsolved problem of early Roman history. The distinction existed during the middle and late republic, but modern scholars do not agree on when or how it arose. They are increasingly inclined to think that it originated and evolved slowly during the early republic. By the time of the middle and late republic, it was largely meaningless. At that point only about one dozen Roman families were [patrician](https://www.britannica.com/topic/patrician), all others being [plebeian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/plebeian). Both patrician and plebeian families made up the nobility, which consisted simply of all descendants of consuls. The term “patrician,” therefore, was not synonymous with “noble” and should not be confused with it: the patricians formed only a part of the Roman nobility of the middle and late republic. The only difference between patricians and plebeians in later times was that each group was either entitled to or debarred from holding certain minor offices. The discrepancies, inconsistencies, and logical fallacies in Livy’s account of the early republic make it evident that the annalistic tradition’s thesis of a struggle of the orders is a gross oversimplification of a highly complex series of events that had no single cause. Tensions certainly existed; no state can experience 200 years of history without some degree of social conflict and economic unrest. In fact, legal sources indicate that the law of debt in early Rome was extremely harsh and must have sometimes created much hardship. Yet it is impossible to believe that all aspects of early Rome’s internal political development resulted from one cause. Early documents, if available, would have told the later annalistic historians little more than that a certain office had been created or some law passed. An explanation of causality could have been supplied only by folklore or by the imagination of the historian himself, neither of which can be relied upon. Livy’s descriptions of early republican political crises evince the political [rhetoric](https://www.britannica.com/topic/rhetoric) and tactics of the late republic and therefore cannot be given [credence](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/credence) without justification. For example, early republican agrarian legislation is narrated in late republican terms. Early republican conflicts between plebeian tribunes and the Senate are likewise patterned after the politics of the [Optimates and Populares](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Optimates-and-Populares) of the late republic. Caution therefore must be exercised in examining early Rome’s internal development. Many of the major innovations recorded in the ancient tradition can be accepted, but the ancient interpretation of these facts cannot go unchallenged.

## The [consulship](https://www.britannica.com/topic/consul-ancient-Roman-official)

The later Romans viewed the abolition of the kingship and its replacement by the consulship as marking the beginning of the republic. The king’s religious functions were henceforth performed by a priest-king ([*rex sacrorum*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/rex-sacrorum)), who held office for life. The king’s military power ([*imperium*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/imperium-Roman-law)) was bestowed upon two annually elected magistrates called consuls. They were always regarded as the chief magistrates of the republic, so much so that the names of each pair were given to their year of office for purposes of dating. Thus careful records were kept of these names, which later formed the chronological basis for ancient histories of the republic. The consuls were primarily generals who led Rome’s armies in war. They were therefore elected by the centuriate assembly—that is, the Roman army organized into a voting body. The two consuls possessed equal power. Such [collegiality](https://www.britannica.com/topic/collegiality) was basic to almost all Roman public offices; it served to check abuses of power because one magistrate’s actions could be obstructed by his colleague.

According to the annalistic tradition, the first plebeian [consul](https://www.britannica.com/topic/consul-ancient-Roman-official) was elected for 366 BC. All consuls before that time were thought to have been patrician, and one major aspect of the struggle of the orders was supposed to have been the plebeians’ persistent agitation to make the office open to them. However, if the classification of patrician and plebeian names known for the middle and late republic is applied to the consular list for the years 509–445 BC, plebeian names are well represented (30 percent). It is likely that there never was a prohibition against plebeians holding the consulship. The distinction between patrician and plebeian families may have become fixed only by the middle of the 4th century BC, and the law of that time (367 BC), which specified that one of the consuls was to be plebeian, may have done nothing more than to guarantee legally that both groups of the nobility would have an equal share in the state’s highest office.

## The [dictatorship](https://www.britannica.com/topic/dictator-Roman-official)

Despite the advantages of consular collegiality, in military emergencies unity of command was sometimes necessary. Rome’s solution to this problem was the appointment of a [dictator](https://www.britannica.com/topic/dictator-Roman-official) in place of the consuls. According to ancient tradition, the office of dictator was created in 501 BC, and it was used periodically down to the [Second Punic War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Second-Punic-War). The dictator held supreme military command for no longer than six months. He was also termed the master of the army (magister populi), and he appointed a subordinate cavalry commander, the master of horse (*magister equitum*). The office was thoroughly constitutional and should not be confused with the late republican dictatorships of [Sulla](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sulla) and Caesar, which were simply legalizations of autocratic power obtained through military usurpation.

**The**[**Senate**](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history)**of Ancient Rome**

The Senate may have existed under the monarchy and served as an advisory council for the king. Its name suggests that it was originally composed of elderly men (*senes*), whose age and knowledge of traditions must have been highly valued in a [preliterate society](https://www.britannica.com/topic/nonliterate-society). During the republic, the Senate was composed of members from the leading families. Its size during the early republic is unknown. Ancient sources indicate that it numbered about 300 during the middle republic. Its members were collectively termed *patres et conscripti* (“the fathers and the enrolled”), suggesting that the Senate was initially composed of two different groups. Since the term “patrician” was derived from patres and seems to have originally meant “a member of the patres,” the [dichotomy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dichotomy) probably somehow involved the distinction between patricians and plebeians.

During the republic the Senate advised both magistrates and the Roman people. Although in theory the people were [sovereign](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sovereign) (see below) and the Senate only offered advice, in actual practice the Senate wielded enormous power because of the [collective](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/collective) [prestige](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prestige) of its members. It was by far the most important deliberative body in the Roman state, summoned into session by a magistrate who submitted matters to it for discussion and debate. Whatever a majority voted in favour of was termed “the Senate’s advice” ([*senatus consultum*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/senatus-consultum)). These advisory decrees were directed to a magistrate or the Roman people. In most instances, they were either [implemented](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/implemented) by a magistrate or submitted by him to the people for enactment into law.

## The popular assemblies

During the republic two different assemblies elected magistrates, exercised legislative power, and made other important decisions. Only adult male Roman citizens could attend the assemblies in [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome) and exercise the [right to vote](https://www.britannica.com/topic/suffrage). The assemblies were organized according to the principle of the group vote. Although each person cast one vote, he did so within a larger voting unit. The majority vote of the unit became its vote, and a majority of unit votes was needed to decide an issue.

The centuriate assembly ([*comitia centuriata*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Comitia-Centuriata)), as stated, was military in nature and composed of voting groups called centuries (military units). Because of its military character, it always met outside the sacred boundary of the city (pomerium) in the [Field of Mars](https://www.britannica.com/place/Campus-Martius) (Campus Martius). It voted on war and peace and elected all magistrates who exercised [imperium](https://www.britannica.com/topic/imperium-Roman-law) (consuls, praetors, censors, and curule aediles). Before the creation of criminal courts during the late republic, it sat as a high court and exercised capital jurisdiction. Although it could legislate, this function was usually performed by the tribal assembly.

The centuriate assembly evolved through different stages during the early republic, but information exists only about its final organization. It may have begun as the citizen army meeting under arms to elect its commander and to decide on war or peace. During historical times the assembly had a complex organization. All voting citizens were placed into one of five economic classes according to wealth. Each class was allotted varying numbers of centuries, and the entire assembly consisted of 193 units. The first (and richest) class of citizens was distributed among 80 centuries, and the second, third, and fourth classes were each assigned 20 units. The fifth class, [comprising](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comprising) the poorest persons in the army, was allotted 30 centuries. In addition, there were 18 centuries of knights—men wealthy enough to afford a horse for cavalry service—and five other centuries, one of which [comprised](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comprised) the proletarii, or landless people too poor to serve in the army. The knights voted together with the first class, and voting proceeded from richest to poorest. Because the knights and the first class controlled 98 units, they were the dominant group in the assembly, though they [constituted](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constituted) the smallest portion of the citizen body. The assembly was deliberately designed to give the greater authority to the wealthier element and was responsible for maintaining the political supremacy of the established nobility.

The tribal assembly ([*comitia tributa*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Comitia-Tributa)) was a nonmilitary civilian assembly. It accordingly met within the city inside the pomerium and elected magistrates who did not exercise imperium (plebeian tribunes, plebeian aediles, and quaestors). It did most of the legislating and sat as a court for serious public offenses involving [monetary](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/monetary) fines.

The tribal assembly was more democratic in its organization than the centuriate assembly. The territory of the Roman state was divided into geographic districts called tribes, and people voted in these units according to residence. The city was divided into four urban tribes. During the 5th century BC, the surrounding countryside formed 17 rustic tribes. With the expansion of Roman territory in central [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy) (387–241 BC), 14 rustic tribes were added, thus gradually increasing the assembly to 35 units, a number never exceeded.

## The [plebeian tribunate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/plebeian-tribune)

According to the annalistic tradition, one of the most important events in the struggle of the orders was the creation of the plebeian tribunate. After being worn down by military service, bad economic conditions, and the rigours of early Rome’s debt law, the plebeians in 494 BC seceded in a body from the city to the Sacred Mount, located three miles from Rome. There they pitched camp and elected their own officials for their future protection. Because the state was threatened with an enemy attack, the Senate was forced to allow the plebeians to have their own officials, the tribunes of the plebs.

Initially there were only 2 tribunes of the plebs, but their number increased to 5 in 471 BC and to 10 in 457 BC. They had no insignia of office, like the consuls, but they were regarded as [sacrosanct](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sacrosanct). Whoever physically harmed them could be killed with [impunity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/impunity). They had the right to intercede on a citizen’s behalf against the action of a [consul](https://www.britannica.com/topic/consul-ancient-Roman-official), but their powers were valid only within one mile from the pomerium. They convoked the tribal assembly and submitted bills to it for legislation. Tribunes prosecuted other magistrates before the assembled people for misconduct in office. They could also veto the action of another [tribune](https://www.britannica.com/topic/tribune-Roman-official) (veto meaning “I forbid”). Two plebeian [aediles](https://www.britannica.com/topic/aedile) served as their assistants in managing the affairs of the city. Although they were thought of as the champions of the people, persons elected to this office came from aristocratic families and generally favoured the status quo. Nevertheless, the office could be and sometimes was used by young aspiring aristocrats to make a name for themselves by taking up [populist](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/populist) causes in opposition to the nobility.

Modern scholars disagree about the authenticity of the annalistic account concerning the plebs’ first secession and the creation of the plebeian tribunate. The tradition presented this as the first of three secessions, the other two allegedly occurring in 449 and 287 BC. The second secession is clearly fictitious. Many scholars regard the first one as a later annalistic invention as well, accepting only the last one as historical. Although the first secession is explained in terms resembling the conditions of the later Gracchan agrarian crisis (see below [The reform movement of the Gracchi [133–121 BC]](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Rome/The-reform-movement-of-the-Gracchi-133-121-bc#ref26627)), given the harshness of early Roman debt laws and food shortages recorded by the sources for 492 and 488 BC (information likely to be preserved in contemporary religious records), social and economic unrest could have contributed to the creation of the office. However, the urban-civilian character of the plebeian tribunate complements the extra-urban military nature of the consulship so nicely that the two offices may have originally been designed to function cooperatively to satisfy the needs of the state rather than to be antagonistic to one another.

## The [Law of the Twelve Tables](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Law-of-the-Twelve-Tables)

The next major episode after the creation of the plebeian tribunate in the annalistic version of the struggle of the orders involved the first systematic codification of [Roman law](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-law). The plebeians were supposed to have desired a written [law code](https://www.britannica.com/topic/law-code) in which consular imperium would be circumscribed to guard against abuses. After years of tribunician agitation the Senate finally agreed. A special board of 10 men ([*decemviri*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/decemviri)) was appointed for 451 BC to draw up a law code. Since their task was not done after one year, a second board of 10 was appointed to finish the job, but they became tyrannical and stayed in office beyond their time. They were finally forced out of power when one commissioner’s cruel lust for an innocent maiden named Verginia so outraged the people that they seceded for a second time.

The law code was inscribed upon 12 [bronze](https://www.britannica.com/technology/bronze-alloy) tablets and publicly displayed in the Forum. Its provisions concerned [legal procedure](https://www.britannica.com/topic/procedural-law), debt foreclosure, paternal authority over children, [property rights](https://www.britannica.com/topic/property-law), inheritance, funerary regulations, and various major and minor offenses. Although many of its provisions became outmoded and were modified or replaced in later times, the Law of the Twelve Tables formed the basis of all subsequent Roman private law.

Because the law code seems not to have had any specific provisions concerning consular imperium, the annalistic explanation for the codification appears suspect. The story of the second tyrannical board of 10 is an annalistic invention patterned after the 30 tyrants of Athenian history. The tale of Verginia is likewise modeled after the story of [Lucretia](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lucretia-ancient-Roman-heroine) and the overthrow of Rome’s last king. Thus the second secession, which is an [integral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/integral) part of the story, cannot be regarded as historical. On the basis of existing evidence, one cannot say whether the law code resulted from any social or economic causes. Rome was a growing city and may simply have been in need of a systematic body of law.

## [Military tribunes](https://www.britannica.com/topic/military-tribune) with consular power

The creation of the office of military tribunes with consular power in 445 BC was believed to have involved the struggle of the orders. The annalistic tradition portrayed the [innovation](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/innovation) as resulting from a political compromise between plebeian tribunes, demanding access to the consulship, and the Senate, trying to maintain the [patrician](https://www.britannica.com/topic/patrician) monopoly of the office. Henceforth, each year the people were to decide whether to elect two patrician consuls or military tribunes with consular power who could be patricians or plebeians. The list of magistrates for 444 to 367 BC shows that the chief magistracy alternated between consuls and military tribunes. Consuls were more frequently elected down to 426 but rarely thereafter. At first there were three military tribunes, but the number increased to four in 426 and to six in 406. The consular tribunate was abolished in 367 BC and replaced by the consulship.

[Livy](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Livy) indicates that according to some sources the consular tribunate was created because Rome was faced with three wars simultaneously. Because there is evidence that there was no prohibition against plebeians becoming consuls, scholars have suggested that the reason for the innovation was the growing military and administrative needs of the Roman state; this view is [corroborated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/corroborated) by other data. Beginning in 447 BC, two [quaestors](https://www.britannica.com/topic/quaestor-ancient-Roman-official) were elected as financial officials of the consuls, and the number increased to four in 421 BC. Beginning in 443 BC, two [censors](https://www.britannica.com/topic/censor-ancient-Roman-official) were elected about every five years and held office for 18 months. They drew up official lists of Roman citizens, assessed the value of their property, and assigned them to their proper tribe and century within the tribal and centuriate assemblies. The increase in the number of military tribunes coincided with Rome’s first two major wars, against Fidenae and [Veii](https://www.britannica.com/place/Veii). In 366 BC six undifferentiated military tribunes were replaced with five magistrates that had specific functions: two consuls for conducting wars, an urban [praetor](https://www.britannica.com/topic/praetor) who handled lawsuits in Rome, and two curule aediles who managed various affairs in the city. In 362 BC the Romans began to elect annually six military tribunes as subordinate officers of the consuls.

## Social and economic changes

The law reinstating the consulship was one of three tribunician bills, the so-called Licinio-Sextian Rogations of 367 BC. Another forbade citizens to rent more than 500 iugera (330 acres) of public land, and the third provided for the alleviation of indebtedness. The historicity of the second bill has often been questioned, but the great increase in the size of Roman territory resulting from Rome’s conquest of Veii renders this law plausible. The law concerning indebtedness is probably historical as well, since other data suggest that debt was a problem in mid-4th-century Rome. In 352 BC a five-man commission was appointed to extend public credit in [order](https://www.britannica.com/technology/order-architecture) to reduce private indebtedness. A Genucian law of 342 BC (named after Genucius, tribune of that year) temporarily suspended the charging of interest on loans. In 326 or 313 BC a Poetelian law [ameliorated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ameliorated) the harsh conditions of the Twelve Tables regarding [debt servitude](https://www.britannica.com/topic/debt-slavery) by outlawing the use of chains to confine debt bondsmen.

Rome’s economic advancement is reflected in its replacement of a cumbersome bronze currency with silver coinage adopted from the Greek states of southern Italy, the so-called Romano-Campanian didrachms. The date of this innovation is disputed. Modern estimates range from the First Samnite War to the [Pyrrhic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Pyrrhic) War. Rome was no longer a small town of central Italy but rather was quickly becoming the master of the Italian peninsula and was taking its place in the larger Mediterranean world.

The process of expansion is well illustrated by [innovations](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/innovations) in Roman private law about 300 BC. Since legal business could be conducted only on certain days (dies fasti), knowledge of the calendar was important for litigation. In early times the rex sacrorum at the beginning of each month orally proclaimed in Rome before the assembled people the official calendar for that month. Though suited for a small agricultural [community](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community), this [parochial](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/parochial) procedure became increasingly unsuitable as Roman territory grew and more citizens lived farther from Rome. In 304 BC a curule aedile named [Gnaeus Flavius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gnaeus-Flavius) upset [conservative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conservative) opinion but performed a great public service by erecting an inscription of the calendar in the [Roman Forum](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Forum) for permanent display. From early times, Roman private law and legal procedure had largely been controlled and developed by the priesthood of pontiffs. In 300 BC the Ogulnian law (after the tribunes Gnaeus and Quintus Ogulnius) ended the patrician monopoly of two priestly colleges by increasing the number of pontiffs from four to eight and the number of augurs from four to nine and by specifying that the new priests were to be plebeian.

In 287 BC the third (and perhaps the only historical) secession of the plebs occurred. Since Livy’s account has not survived, detailed knowledge about this event is lacking. One source suggests that debt caused the secession. Many sources state that the crisis was ended by the passage of the Hortensian law (after [Quintus Hortensius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Quintus-Hortensius), [dictator](https://www.britannica.com/topic/dictator-Roman-official) for 287), which was thought to have given enactments of the tribal assembly the same force as resolutions of the centuriate assembly. However, since similar measures were supposed to have been enacted in 449 and 339 BC, doubt persists about the meaning of these laws. It is possible that no difference ever existed in the degree of legal authority of the two assemblies. The three laws could be annalistic misinterpretations of a provision of the Twelve Tables specifying that what the people decided last should be binding. One source indicates that the Hortensian law made all assembly days eligible for legal business. If debt played a role in the secession, the Hortensian law may have been designed to reduce the backlog of lawsuits in the praetor’s court in Rome.

**The**[**Latin League**](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Latin-League)

Although the Latins dwelled in politically independent towns, their common [language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/language) and [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture) produced cooperation in religion, law, and warfare. All Latins could participate in the cults of commonly worshiped divinities, such as the cult of the [Penates](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Penates) of Lavinium, [Juno](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Juno-Roman-goddess) of Lanuvium, and [Diana](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Diana-Roman-religion) (celebrated at both Aricia and Rome). Latins freely intermarried without legal complications. When visiting another Latin town, they could buy, sell, litigate, and even vote with equal freedom. If a Latin took up permanent residence in another Latin [community](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community), he became a full citizen of his new home. Although the Latin states occasionally waged war among themselves, in times of common danger they banded together for mutual defense. Each state contributed military forces according to its strength. The command of all forces was entrusted by common assent to a single person from one of the Latin towns. Sometimes the Latins even founded colonies upon hostile territory as military outposts, which became new, independent Latin states, enjoying the same rights as all the other ones. Modern scholars use the term “Latin League” to describe this collection of rights and duties.

According to ancient tradition, [Rome’s](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome) last three kings not only transformed Rome into a real city but also made it the leader of the Latin League. There is probably exaggeration in this claim. Roman historians were eager to portray early Rome as destined for future greatness and as more powerful than it actually was. Rome certainly became one of the more important states in Latium during the 6th century, but Tibur, [Praeneste](https://www.britannica.com/place/Praeneste), and [Tusculum](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tusculum) were equally important and long remained so. By the terms of the first [treaty](https://www.britannica.com/topic/treaty) between Rome and [Carthage](https://www.britannica.com/place/Carthage-ancient-city-Tunisia) (509 BC), recorded by the Greek historian [Polybius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Polybius) (c. 150 BC), the Romans (or, perhaps more accurately, the Latins generally) claimed a coastal strip 70 miles south of the [Tiber River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tiber-River) as their sphere of influence not to be [encroached](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/encroached) upon by the Carthaginians.

Rome’s rapid rise during the 6th century was the achievement of its [Etruscan](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Etruscan) overlords, and the city quickly declined with the collapse of Etruscan power in Campania and Latium about 500 BC. Immediately after the fall of the Roman monarchy, amid Porsenna’s conquest of Rome, his defeat by the Latins, and his subsequent withdrawal, the plain of Latium began to be threatened by surrounding hill tribes (Sabines, Aequi, and Volsci), who experienced overpopulation and tried to acquire more land. Thus Rome’s external affairs during the 5th century largely revolved around its military assistance to the Latin League to hold back these invaders. Many details in [Livy’s](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Livy) account of this fighting are, however, unreliable. In [order](https://www.britannica.com/technology/order-architecture) to have a literary theme worthy of Rome’s later greatness, Livy’s annalistic sources had described these conflicts in the most grandiose terms. Yet the armies, military ranks, castrametation (i.e., techniques in making and fortifying encampments), and tactics described belong to the late republic, not the Rome of the 5th century.

## Roman expansion in Italy

Toward the end of the 5th century, while Rome and the Latins were still defending themselves against the Volsci and the Aequi, the Romans began to expand at the expense of Etruscan states. Rome’s incessant warfare and expansion during the republic has spawned modern debate about the nature of Roman imperialism. Ancient Roman historians, who were often patriotic senators, believed that Rome always waged just wars in self-defense, and they wrote their accounts accordingly, distorting or suppressing facts that did not fit this view. The modern thesis of Roman defensive imperialism, which followed this ancient bias, is now largely discredited. Only the fighting in the 5th century BC and the later wars against the [Gauls](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe) can clearly be so characterized. Rome’s relentless expansion was more often responsible for provoking its neighbours to fight in self-defense. Roman consuls, who led the legions into battle, often advocated war because victory gained them personal glory. Members of the [centuriate assembly](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Comitia-Centuriata), which, as noted above, decided war and peace, may sometimes have voted for war in expectation that it would lead to personal enrichment through seizure and distribution of booty. The evidence concerning Roman expansion during the early republic is poor, but the fact that Rome created 14 new rustic tribes during the years 387–241 BC suggests that population growth could have been a driving force. Furthermore, Romans living on the frontier may have strongly favoured war against restless neighbours, such as the Gauls and the [Samnites](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Samnite-people). The [animal husbandry](https://www.britannica.com/science/animal-husbandry) of the latter involved seasonal migrations between summer uplands and winter lowlands, which caused friction between them and settled Roman farmers.

Though the Romans did not wage wars for religious ends, they often used religious means to assist their war effort. The [fetial](https://www.britannica.com/topic/fetial) priests were used for the solemn official declaration of war. According to fetial law, Rome could enjoy divine favour only if it waged just wars—that is, wars of self-defense. In later practice, this often simply meant that Rome maneuvered other states into declaring war upon it. Then Rome followed with its declaration, acting technically in self-defense. This strategy had the effect of boosting Roman morale and sometimes swaying international [public opinion](https://www.britannica.com/topic/public-opinion).

Rome’s first major war against an organized state was fought with Fidenae (437–426 BC), a town located just upstream from Rome. After it had been conquered, its land was annexed to Roman territory. Rome next fought a long and difficult war against Veii, an important Etruscan city not far from Fidenae. Later Roman historians portrayed the war as having lasted 10 years (406–396 BC), patterning it after the mythical [Trojan War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Trojan-War) of the Greeks. After its conquest, Veii’s tutelary goddess, Queen Juno, was solemnly summoned to Rome. The city’s territory was annexed, increasing Roman territory by 84 percent and forming four new rustic tribes. During the wars against Fidenae and Veii, Rome increased the number of military tribunes with consular power from three to four and then from four to six. In 406 BC Rome instituted military pay, and in 403 BC it increased the size of its cavalry. The conquest of Veii opened southern Etruria to further Roman expansion. During the next few years, Rome proceeded to found colonies at Nepet and Sutrium and forced the towns of Falerii and [Capena](https://www.britannica.com/place/Capena) to become its allies. Yet, before Roman strength increased further, a marauding Gallic tribe swept down from the Po River valley, raided Etruria, and descended upon Rome. The Romans were defeated in the battle of the Allia River in 390 BC, and the Gauls captured and sacked the city; they departed only after they had received ransom in gold. Henceforth the Romans greatly feared and respected the potential strength of the Gauls. Later Roman historians, however, told patriotic tales about the commanders Marcus Manlius and [Marcus Furius Camillus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Furius-Camillus) in order to [mitigate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mitigate) the humiliation of the defeat.

Roman power had suffered a great reversal, and 40 years of hard fighting in Latium and Etruria were required to restore it fully. The terms of the second treaty between Rome and Carthage (348 BC) show Rome’s sphere of influence to be about the same as it had been at the time of the first treaty in 509, but Rome’s position in Latium was now far stronger.

## The [Samnite Wars](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Samnite-Wars)

During the 40 years after the second treaty with Carthage, Rome rapidly rose to a position of [hegemony](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hegemony) in [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy) south of the Po valley. Much of the fighting during this time consisted of three wars against the Samnites, who initially were not politically unified but coexisted as separate Oscan-speaking tribes of the central and southern Apennines. Rome’s expansion was probably responsible for uniting these tribes militarily to oppose a common enemy. Both the rugged terrain and the tough Samnite soldiers proved to be [formidable](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/formidable) challenges, which forced Rome to adopt military [innovations](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/innovations) that were later important for conquering the Mediterranean.

Despite its [brevity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/brevity) (343–341 BC), the First Samnite War resulted in the major acquisition to the Roman state of the rich land of [Campania](https://www.britannica.com/place/Campania-region-Italy) with its capital of [Capua](https://www.britannica.com/place/Capua-ancient-city-Italy). Roman historians modeled their description of the war’s beginning on the Greek historian Thucydides’ account of the outbreak of the [Peloponnesian War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Peloponnesian-War) between Athens and Sparta. Nevertheless, they were probably correct in stating that the Campanians, when fighting over the town of Capua with the Samnites, allied themselves with Rome in order to utilize its might to settle the quarrel. If so, this may have been the first of many instances in which Rome went to war after being invited into an alliance by a weaker state already at war. Once invited in, Rome usually absorbed the allied state after defeating its adversary. In any event, Campania now somehow became firmly attached to Rome, and it may have been granted Roman citizenship without the [right to vote](https://www.britannica.com/topic/suffrage) in Rome (civitas sine suffragio). Campania was a major addition to Rome’s strength and manpower.

The absorption of Campania provoked the Latins to take up arms against Rome to maintain their independence. Since the Gallic sack of Rome in 390 BC, the city had become increasingly dominant within the Latin League. In 381 BC Tusculum was absorbed by being given Roman citizenship. In 358 BC Rome created two more rustic tribes from territory captured along the Volscian coast. The [Latin War](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Latin-War) (340–338 BC) was quickly decided in Rome’s favour. Virtually all of Latium was given Roman citizenship and became Roman territory, but the towns retained their local governments. The large states of Praeneste and Tibur maintained [nominal](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nominal) independence by becoming Rome’s military allies. Thus the Latin League was abolished, but the legal rights that the Latins had enjoyed among themselves were retained by Rome as a legal status, the Latin right (ius Latii), and used for centuries as an intermediate step between non-Roman status and full Roman citizenship.

Rome was now the master of central Italy and spent the next decade organizing and pushing forward its frontier through conquest and colonization. The Romans soon confronted the Samnites of the middle Liris (modern Liri) River valley, sparking the Second, or Great, Samnite War (326–304 BC). During the first half of the war Rome suffered serious defeats, but the second half saw Rome’s recovery, reorganization, and ultimate victory. In 321 BC a Roman army was trapped in a narrow canyon near the [Caudine Forks](https://www.britannica.com/place/Caudine-Forks) and compelled to surrender, and Rome was forced to sign a five-year treaty. Later Roman historians, however, tried to deny this humiliation by inventing stories of Rome’s rejection of the peace and its revenge upon the Samnites. In 315 BC, after the resumption of hostilities, Rome suffered a crushing defeat at Lautulae. Ancient sources state that Rome initially borrowed [hoplite](https://www.britannica.com/topic/hoplite) tactics from the Etruscans (used during the 6th or 5th centuries BC) but later adopted the manipular system of the Samnites, probably as a result of Samnite success at this time. The manipular formation resembled a checkerboard pattern, in which solid squares of soldiers were separated by empty square spaces. It was far more flexible than the solidly massed hoplite formation, allowing the army to maneuver better on rugged terrain. The system was retained throughout the republic and into the [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science). During these same years Rome organized a [rudimentary](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rudimentary) navy, constructed its first military roads (construction of the [Via Appia](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Appian-Way) was begun in 312 BC and of the Via Valeria in 306), and increased the size of its annual military levy as seen from the increase of annually elected military tribunes from 6 to 16. During the period 334–295 BC, Rome founded 13 colonies against the Samnites and created six new rustic tribes in annexed territory. During the last years of the war, the Romans also extended their power into northern Etruria and Umbria. Several successful campaigns forced the cities in these areas to become Rome’s allies. The Great Samnite War finally ended in Rome’s victory. During the final phase of this war, Rome, on another front, concluded its third treaty with Carthage (306 BC), in which the Carthaginians acknowledged all of Italy as Rome’s sphere of influence.

The Third Samnite War (298–290 BC) was the last desperate attempt of the Samnites to remain independent. They persuaded the Etruscans, Umbrians, and Gauls to join them. Rome emerged victorious over this formidable coalition at the battle of Sentinum in 295 and spent the remainder of the war putting down lingering Samnite resistance. They henceforth were bound to Rome by a series of alliances.

## The Pyrrhic War, 280–275 BC

Rome spent the 280s BC putting down unrest in northern Italy, but its attention was soon directed to the far south as well by a quarrel between the Greek city of Thurii and a Samnite tribe. Thurii called upon the assistance of Rome, whose naval operations in the area provoked a war with the Greek city of [Tarentum](https://www.britannica.com/place/Taranto-Italy). As in previous conflicts with Italian peoples, Tarentum summoned military aid from mainland Greece, calling upon King [Pyrrhus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pyrrhus) of [Epirus](https://www.britannica.com/place/Epirus), one of the most brilliant generals of the ancient world. Pyrrhus arrived in southern Italy in 280 BC with 20 elephants and 25,000 highly trained soldiers. After defeating the Romans at Heraclea and stirring up revolt among the Samnites, he offered peace terms that would have confined Roman power to central Italy. When the [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history) wavered, Appius Claudius, an aged blind senator, roused their courage and persuaded them to continue fighting. Pyrrhus again defeated the Romans in 279 at Asculum. His losses in the two battles numbered 7,500 (almost one-third of his entire force). When congratulated on his victory, Pyrrhus, according to [Plutarch](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Plutarch), “replied…that one other such would utterly undo him.” This type of victory has since been referred to as [Pyrrhic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Pyrrhic) victory. Pyrrhus then left Italy and aided the Greeks of [Sicily](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sicily) against Carthage. He eventually returned to Italy and was defeated by the Romans in 275 BC at [Beneventum](https://www.britannica.com/place/Benevento-Italy). He then returned to Greece, while Rome put down resistance in Italy and took Tarentum itself by siege in 272.

Rome was now the unquestioned master of Italy. Roman territory was a broad belt across central Italy, from sea to sea. Latin colonies were scattered throughout the peninsula. The other peoples of Italy were bound to Rome by a series of bilateral alliances that obligated them to provide Rome with military forces in wartime. According to the Roman census of 225 BC, Rome could call upon 700,000 infantry and 70,000 cavalry from its own citizens and allies. The conquest of Italy engendered a strong military [ethos](https://www.britannica.com/art/ethos) among the Roman nobility and citizenry, provided Rome with considerable manpower, and forced it to develop military, political, and legal institutions and practices for conquering and absorbing foreign peoples. The Pyrrhic War demonstrated that Rome’s civilian army could wage a successful war of [attrition](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/attrition) against highly skilled mercenaries of the Mediterranean world.

# The middle republic (264–133 BC)

## The first two Punic Wars

[Rome’s](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome) rapidly expanding sphere of [hegemony](https://www.britannica.com/topic/hegemony) brought it almost immediately into conflict with non-Italian powers. In the south, the main opponent was [Carthage](https://www.britannica.com/place/Carthage-ancient-city-Tunisia). In violation of the [treaty](https://www.britannica.com/topic/treaty) of 306, which (historians tend to believe) had placed Sicily in the Carthaginian sphere of influence, Rome crossed the straits of Messana ([Messina](https://www.britannica.com/place/Messina); between [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy) and [Sicily](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sicily)) embarking on war. (Rome’s wars with Carthage are known as the “Punic Wars”; the Romans called the Carthaginians Poeni [Phoenicians], from which derived the adjective “Punic.”)

## [First Punic War](https://www.britannica.com/event/First-Punic-War) (264–241 BC)

Carthage had long enjoyed treaties with Rome. The earliest known, which probably dated from the first year of the [Roman Republic](https://www.britannica.com/place/Roman-Republic), as [Polybius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Polybius) believed (508 or 507 by his reckoning), may well have renewed previously made contacts with [Etruscan](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Etruscan) Rome. Such agreements to limit the spheres of interest of the two parties would readily be renewed by Rome, which in the 5th and 4th centuries had no great interest in what went on outside Italy and had no objection to the merchants of Carthage dominating the western Mediterranean. When Rome enrolled some of the Greek cities of south Italy as “naval allies,” a new situation was created, since these cities had [trading](https://www.britannica.com/topic/market) interests that the farmers of [Latium](https://www.britannica.com/place/Latium) had not enjoyed. Further, the Greek cities in Sicily, especially [Syracuse](https://www.britannica.com/place/Syracuse-Italy), were being hard pressed by the Carthaginians in the west and centre of the island, while the Syracusans under [Hieron II](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hieron-II) were challenged by the [Mamertines](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mamertini), Italian mercenaries who had seized Messana and were plundering northeastern Sicily. The Mamertines appealed to both Rome and Carthage for assistance, and the Carthaginians, unwilling to see Messana and control of the [Sicilian straits](https://www.britannica.com/place/Strait-of-Messina) fall into Hieron’s hands, established a Punic garrison in the town. The Romans, who themselves had expelled another company of mercenaries from Rhegium ([Reggio](https://www.britannica.com/place/Reggio-di-Calabria-Italy)) in the toe of Italy, captured the Carthaginian commander while under a flag of truce and compelled the Punic force to withdraw.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/42/1042-050-F1D06D1D/Mediterranean-Punic-Wars.jpg)

[**Western Mediterranean during the Punic Wars**](https://cdn.britannica.com/42/1042-050-F1D06D1D/Mediterranean-Punic-Wars.jpg)Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Thus Rome and Carthage were brought face to face across the straits, and a crisis was precipitated by the appeal by Messana. Although some senators hesitated, the Roman people largely supported war with Carthage. Both Rome and Carthage were eager to deny to the other control of the straits, and, even if war had been avoided at this point, it would probably have come in time. A [balance of power](https://www.britannica.com/topic/balance-of-power), such as that which the [Hellenistic](https://www.britannica.com/event/Hellenistic-Age) monarchies in the East, with longer diplomatic experience and a common [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture), tried to maintain, was more difficult to achieve in the West.

When the Romans, with Hieron, had occupied eastern Sicily and captured [Agrigentum](https://www.britannica.com/place/Agrigento), they were faced with a decision that fundamentally affected their future history. If they decided to try to drive the Carthaginians completely out of Sicily, they would have to smash the Punic navy, and, since they had virtually no ships of their own, they would have to build a fleet. However, they were practical as well as determined, and before long they had over 100 ships ready. More surprising was the success that attended this fleet when it first went into action off [Mylae](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Mylae) ([Milazzo](https://www.britannica.com/place/Milazzo)) in 260 and defeated an enemy with centuries of seafaring experience.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/45/1045-050-4FC20530/Roman-war-galley-deck-infantry-Vatican-Museums.jpg)

[**Roman war galley**](https://cdn.britannica.com/45/1045-050-4FC20530/Roman-war-galley-deck-infantry-Vatican-Museums.jpg)

A Roman war galley with infantry on deck; in the Vatican Museums.

Alinari/Art Resource, New York

After this victory the Romans in 256 boldly sent an expeditionary force to Africa to attack Carthage itself, but this daring adventure under [Marcus Atilus Regulus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Atilius-Regulus) ended in failure. The war dragged on in Sicily, where the Carthaginians were gradually confined to their western fortresses of Drepana ([Trapani](https://www.britannica.com/place/Trapani)) and Lilybaeum ([Marsala](https://www.britannica.com/place/Marsala-Italy)). When their fleet was finally defeated off the Aegadian ([Egadi](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egadi-Islands)) Islands in 241, they [capitulated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/capitulated). By the terms of the settlement they agreed to evacuate Sicily as well as to pay Rome an indemnity, but they remained an independent power.

## [Second Punic War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Second-Punic-War) (218–201 BC)

During the decades between the wars, the Carthaginians had been busy building up an [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science) in Spain which would help to compensate for the loss of Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica. The foundations of this dominion were laid by [Hamilcar Barca](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hamilcar-Barca), who had shown great military ability as commander in Sicily during the last stages of the [First Punic War](https://www.britannica.com/event/First-Punic-War). In 237 he crossed to Spain with his nine-year-old son [Hannibal](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hannibal-Carthaginian-general-247-183-BC), who had been made to swear eternal hatred for Rome. He quickly occupied southern and eastern Spain and managed to dismiss a Roman protest over the expansion of the Punic frontier to the north. When Hamilcar died in 229/228 BC, he was succeeded by his son-in-law [Hasdrubal](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hasdrubal-Carthaginian-general-died-221-BC), who established a new base at Carthago Nova ([Cartagena](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cartagena-Spain)). In 226–225 Hasdrubal made a treaty with the Romans, by which he agreed not to cross the [Ebro River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ebro-River) with an armed force, while the Romans possibly assured him that they would not interfere with his conquests south of the river.

A hundred miles south of the Ebro was the Iberian seaport of Saguntum ([Sagunto](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sagunto)), with which Rome had made an alliance. If this was negotiated before the Ebro treaty, then presumably the alliance was virtually annulled by the agreement; if Rome accepted the alliance after 226, it infringed the spirit and perhaps the letter of the treaty. Thus, when Hannibal, who succeeded Hasdrubal in 221, decided to regard the conquest of Spain as only preliminary to an attack upon Italy, he could use Saguntum to provoke Rome to action. In 219, therefore, when he was ready to challenge Rome, he attacked Saguntum. Disregarding Roman protests, he finally took it after an eight-month siege. This rendered a rupture with Rome inevitable, while it set his own hands free for further advance.

Even if he had not technically broken any agreement with Rome, Hannibal had deliberately provoked an incident which he knew would lead to war. For some time Barcid policy in Spain had been essentially defensive in regard to Rome, but Hannibal now moved to the offensive, and Rome accepted the challenge. Apart from the unprovoked seizure of Sardinia, Rome’s policy after the First Punic War had not been deliberately aggressive: the Gallic wars were defensive in spirit, and the Illyrian campaigns were a necessary piece of police work. Rather, without pursuing deep-laid plans, Rome dealt with each situation as it arose. If Hannibal chose to question Roman interference in Spain, Rome was willing to face the consequences.

[[](https://www.britannica.com/video/179462/Hannibal-campaign-Rome-Saguntum-attack)](https://www.britannica.com/video/179462/Hannibal-campaign-Rome-Saguntum-attack)

**View Hannibal's campaign against Rome with the siege of Saguntum**

Learn about Hannibal's campaign against Rome, beginning with his attack on Saguntum.

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Hannibal’s decision to leave his base in Spain, cross the [Alps](https://www.britannica.com/place/Alps), and invade northern Italy was crowned with success and culminated in a series of victories at [Trebbia](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-the-Trebbia-River), [Trasimene](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Battle-of-Trasimene), and [Cannae](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Cannae). However, although he won over much of southern Italy, including [Capua](https://www.britannica.com/place/Capua-ancient-city-Italy), he failed to break Rome’s determination to fight on, and he failed to undermine the loyalty to Rome of the Latin cities and central Italy. Hence he had to cast his strategic net more widely. This attempt too failed. His ally, [Philip V of Macedonia](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Philip-V-king-of-Macedonia), achieved little; the revolt of Syracuse against Rome was soon crushed; and the defeat of the Scipios in Spain failed to result in the expulsion of the Romans from the peninsula. Hannibal’s own movements and strength in Italy were checked by the delaying strategy of [Quintus Fabius Maximus Verrucosus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Quintus-Fabius-Maximus-Verrucosus), and the breakthrough to Italy by his brother [Hasdrubal](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hasdrubal-Carthaginian-general-died-207-BC) was foiled at the [Metaurus](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Battle-of-the-Metaurus). Finally Rome produced a military [genius](https://www.britannica.com/topic/genius-Roman-religion) in [Scipio Africanus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Scipio-Africanus), who drove the Carthaginians from Spain, persuaded his reluctant countrymen to allow him to invade Africa, won such success there that Hannibal was recalled from Italy to save Carthage, and finally defeated Hannibal at [Zama](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Zama-Roman-Carthaginian-history).

By the terms of the peace, Carthage was left as an independent state but had to give up everything outside an area roughly equivalent to that of modern [Tunisia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tunisia), to surrender its fleet, and to pay an indemnity over a period of 50 years. The Numidian prince [Masinissa](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Masinissa), whose cavalry had rendered Scipio invaluable service at Zama, was rewarded with an increase of territory. As Rome’s ally, he stood watch over his neighbour Carthage, which by the treaty with Rome was forbidden to make war on anyone in Africa without the permission of Rome (and any war at all outside Africa).

The effects of the war on Rome and Italy, on the constitution, on economic and social life, on religion and thought were profound, and it proved to be a turning point not only for them but for the history of the whole ancient world. No contemporary power could endanger the existence of Rome. The Hellenistic monarchies of the east still flourished, but at Rome’s touch they collapsed like a house of cards. German and other [barbarian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/barbarian) tribes in the north could threaten, and the emergent Parthian empire beyond the Euphrates might at times appear menacing, but for centuries such dangers were held at arms’ length.

# The establishment of Roman hegemony in the Mediterranean world

## Roman expansion in the eastern Mediterranean

Just before the [Second Punic War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Second-Punic-War), [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome) had projected its power across the [Adriatic Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Adriatic-Sea) against the Illyrians. As noted, [Philip V of Macedonia](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Philip-V-king-of-Macedonia) in turn had joined the Carthaginians for a time during the war in an attempt to stem the tide of Roman expansion but had agreed to terms of peace with Rome’s allies, the Aetolians, in 206 and then with Rome in the Peace of Phoenice of 205. Immediately after the Second Punic War the Roman [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history) moved to settle affairs with Philip, despite the war-weary [centuriate assembly’s](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Comitia-Centuriata) initial refusal to declare war. Historians have debated Rome’s reasons for this momentous decision, with suggestions ranging from a desire to protect Athenians and other Greeks from Philip out of philhellenism to fear of a secret alliance between Philip and the Seleucid king [Antiochus III](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Antiochus-III-the-Great). Yet these suggestions are belied by the fact that Rome later treated the Greek cities callously and that no fear is apparent in Rome’s increasing demands on Philip and in its refusal to negotiate seriously with him through the course of the war. Rather, the Second [Macedonian War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Macedonian-Wars) (200–196) fits the long pattern of Roman readiness to go to war in [order](https://www.britannica.com/technology/order-architecture) to force ever more distant neighbours to submit to superior Roman power.

In the winter of 200–199, Roman legions marched into the [Balkans](https://www.britannica.com/place/Balkans) under the command of Publius Sulpicius [Galba](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Galba). During the next two years there was no decisive battle, as the Romans gathered allies among the Greeks—not only their previous allies, the Aetolians, but also Philip’s traditional allies, the Achaeans, who recognized Roman military superiority. The [consul](https://www.britannica.com/topic/consul-ancient-Roman-official) of 198, [Titus Quinctius Flamininus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Titus-Quinctius-Flamininus), took over the command and defeated Philip at the battle of Cynoscephalae in 197. The terms of settlement allowed Philip to remain king of Macedonia but [stipulated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stipulated) payment of an indemnity and restrictions on campaigning beyond the borders of his kingdom. Flamininus then sought to win the goodwill of the Greeks with his famous proclamation of their liberation at the [Isthmian Games](https://www.britannica.com/sports/Isthmian-Games) of 196. To lend credibility to this proclamation, he successfully argued against senatorial opposition for the withdrawal of Roman troops from all Greece, including the strategically important “Fetters” (the key garrisons of Acrocorinth, Chalcis, and Demetrias).

Even before the Romans withdrew, the seeds had been sown for their reentry into the East. As an active king, Antiochus III set out to recover the ancestral possessions of his kingdom on the western coast of Anatolia and in [Thrace](https://www.britannica.com/place/Thrace). In response to the Roman demand that he stay out of Europe, the king attempted to negotiate. When the Romans showed little interest in compromise, Antiochus accepted the invitation of Rome’s former allies, the Aetolians, who felt they had not been duly rewarded with additional territory after the victory over Philip, to liberate the Greeks. Upon crossing into Greece, however, the king found no enthusiasm among the other Greeks for a war of liberation and was defeated at Thermopylae in 191 by legions under the command of [Manius Acilius Glabrio](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Manius-Acilius-Glabrio).

Antiochus returned home to gather a larger army. In 190 [Lucius Cornelius Scipio](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucius-Scipio) was elected consul in Rome and was authorized to recruit a force for a campaign against Antiochus. Accompanying Lucius as a [legate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/legate-Roman-official) was his brother, the great general [Scipio Africanus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Scipio-Africanus). In an attempt to avert war, Antiochus offered to accept the earlier Roman terms, only to find that the Romans had now extended their demands to keep Antiochus east of the [Taurus Mountains](https://www.britannica.com/place/Taurus-Mountains) of Anatolia. Unable to accept, Antiochus fought and lost to Scipio’s army at [Magnesia ad Sipylum](https://www.britannica.com/place/Magnesia-ad-Sipylum) in the winter of 190–189. In the following [Treaty of Apamea](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Treaty-of-Apamea) (188), the [Seleucid kingdom](https://www.britannica.com/place/Seleucid-Empire) was limited to [Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Asia) east of the Taurus range and was required to pay an indemnity of 15,000 talents and to give up its elephants and all but 10 ships. Rome punished its opponents, the Aetolians, and rewarded its supporters, notably Pergamum and Rhodes, which were granted new territories, including Greek cities, at the expense of “the liberation of the Greeks.” The consul of 189, Gnaeus Manlius Vulso, came east with reinforcements, took command of the legions, and proceeded to plunder the Galatians of Anatolia on the pretext of restoring order.

The withdrawal of Roman legions this time did not entail the withdrawal of a Roman presence from the [Hellenistic](https://www.britannica.com/event/Hellenistic-Age) East. On the contrary, according to [Polybius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Polybius), the Romans now “were displeased if all matters were not referred to them and if everything was not done in accordance with their decision.” Continuing jealousies and disputes in the Greek world offered Rome opportunities to [adjudicate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adjudicate) and ultimately to intervene once again. In the [Peloponnese](https://www.britannica.com/place/Peloponnese) the [Achaean League](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Achaean-League) was at odds with [Sparta](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sparta), wishing to bring Sparta into the league and to suppress the radical social program of its king, [Nabis](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nabis-ruler-of-Sparta). Flamininus in 195 supported the independence of [Sparta](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sparta), but in 192 the Achaean leader, [Philopoemen](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Philopoemen), induced Sparta to join the league with a promise of no interference in its internal affairs. When an infringement of the promise prompted the Spartans to secede, Philopoemen in 188 led an Achaean army to take Sparta, kill the anti-Achaean leaders, and force the city back into the league. Although the Senate heard complaints, it took no immediate action. Then, in 184, the Senate reasserted its own terms for settlement but was [circumvented](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/circumvented) by Philopoemen, who reached a separate agreement with the Spartans. The independent-minded Philopoemen died the following year in a campaign by the league to suppress a revolt of [Messene](https://www.britannica.com/place/Messina). His death led to a change of leadership, as the pro-Roman Callicrates (regarded by Polybius as a sycophant) began a policy of obeying Rome’s every wish.

Meanwhile, tensions between Rome and Philip were increasing. Philip had supported Rome’s war with Antiochus in the hope of recovering Thessalian and Thracian territory, but in this he was disappointed by the Romans. They did, however, return Philip’s younger son, [Demetrius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Demetrius-Macedonian-prince), taken to Rome as a hostage in 197—a reward with tragic consequences. During his years as a hostage, Demetrius had made senatorial friendships, which aroused suspicions at home that the Romans would prefer to see Demetrius rather than his elder brother, [Perseus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Perseus-king-of-Macedonia), succeed Philip. Philip ordered the death of Demetrius in 181 and then died in 179, leaving his throne to Perseus, the last king of Macedonia.

Perseus’s activism started a stream of complaints to the Senate from neighbouring Greek powers from 175 onward. The king’s real intentions are unclear; perhaps Polybius was right that he wished to make the Romans “more cautious about delivering harsh and unjust orders to Macedonians.” The Senate listened to the unfavourable interpretations of Perseus’s enemies, who claimed that the king’s actions revealed an intent to attack Rome. Like his father, Perseus campaigned to extend Macedonian power to the northeast and south and marched through Greece as far as Delphi. He solicited alliances with the Achaean League and other Greek states, which some of the leaders hostile to Rome would have liked to accept. He arranged dynastic marriages with other Hellenistic kings, taking the daughter of [Seleucus IV](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Seleucus-IV-Philopator) as his wife and giving the hand of his sister to Prusias II of [Bithynia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bithynia). Although these actions could have been viewed as the behaviour expected of a Hellenistic monarch, Eumenes of Pergamum suggested to the Senate that Perseus was preparing for war against Rome. After the Senate decided on war, it sent Quintus Marcius Philippus to propose a truce and to give Perseus false hopes of negotiation in order to allow the consul of 171, Publius [Licinius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Licinius) Crassus, to land his army on the Illyrian coast unhindered—a ploy decried by some older senators as “the new wisdom.”

Perseus’s initial success against the Roman army in Thessaly in 171 did not alter the massive imbalance of power, and the Romans again refused the king’s offer to negotiate. Over the next three years Roman commanders devoted more effort to plunder than to the defeat of Perseus. In a [notorious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/notorious) incident, the [praetor](https://www.britannica.com/topic/praetor) Lucius Hortensius anchored his fleet at Abdera, a city allied with Rome, and demanded supplies. When the Abderitans asked to consult the Senate, Hortensius sacked the town, executed the leading citizens, and enslaved the rest. When complaints reached the Senate, weak attempts were made to force the Roman commanders to make restitution. In 168 the experienced Lucius Aemilius Paullus was reelected consul and sent out to restore [discipline](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discipline). He quickly brought the Third [Macedonian War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Macedonian-Wars) to an end by defeating Perseus in the [Battle of Pydna](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Pydna) in June 168. Perseus was deposed, and Macedonia was divided into four republics, which were forbidden to have relations with one another; they paid tribute to Rome at half the rate they had previously paid to the king.

In 167 Rome proceeded to punish those who had sided with Perseus (such as the [Illyrian](https://www.britannica.com/place/Illyria) Genthius), those whose loyalty had wavered (such as Eumenes), and even those who had contemplated acting as mediators in the war (such as the Rhodians). In [Illyria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Illyria), [Paullus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucius-Aemilius-Paullus-Macedonicus), on instructions from the Senate, swept through the countryside enslaving 150,000 inhabitants from 70 Epirote towns. In Achaea, 1,000 leading men suspected of Macedonian sympathies were taken as hostages to Rome. (Among them was Polybius, who befriended the noble Scipionic [family](https://www.britannica.com/topic/family-kinship) and wrote his great history of the rise of Rome with the aid of privileged access to the views of the senatorial leadership.) Eumenes was refused a hearing before the Senate on his visit to [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy). His fall from favour prompted his enemies to dispute his territory, and in 164 a Roman embassy in Anatolia publicly invited complaints against the king. [Rhodes](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rhodes-Greece) had thrived as the leading trade centre of the eastern Mediterranean, using its considerable resources to control [piracy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/piracy-international-law), but now Rome undermined its economy and power by making the island of Delos a [free port](https://www.britannica.com/topic/free-trade-zone), thereby depriving Rhodes of its income from harbour dues. Territory in [Lycia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lycia) and [Caria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Caria) on the mainland, granted to Rhodes in 189, was now taken away. But the far harsher proposal in the Senate to declare Rhodes an enemy and to destroy it was opposed by senior senators such as [Cato the Censor](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Porcius-Cato-Roman-statesman-234-149-BC) and was voted down. As a result of the weakening of Rhodes, piracy became rampant in the eastern Mediterranean (the young Julius Caesar was captured by pirates). During the next century Roman senators did not find the political will to suppress the piracy, perhaps in part because it served their interests: pirates supplied tens of thousands of slaves for their Italian estates and disrupted the grain trade, thus raising prices for their produce in Rome.

The arrangements of 167 served the Roman policy of weakening the powers of the eastern Mediterranean. In the previous year Rome had also intervened to stop Seleucid expansion into Egypt. In a famous episode, the Roman ambassador [Gaius Popillius Laenas](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaius-Popillius-Laenas) delivered to Antiochus IV the Senate’s demand that the king withdraw from [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt). When the king requested time for consultation, Popillius “drew a circle around the king with a stick he was carrying and told him not to leave the circle until he gave his response. The king was astonished at this occurrence and the display of superiority, but, after a brief time, said he would do all the Romans demanded.”

The power vacuum fostered by the Romans was not ultimately [conducive](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conducive) to stability. An adventurer, Andriscus, claiming to be descended from the Macedonian [dynasty](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dynasty), was able to enter the Macedonian republics without serious resistance. He was successful enough in raising an army to defeat the first Roman force sent against him in 149 under the command of the praetor Publius Iuventius Thalna (who was killed). A second Roman army under Quintus Caecilius Metellus defeated the pretender in 148. With the death of Callicrates, leadership of the Achaean League passed to Critolaus and Diaeus, outspoken proponents of Greek independence from Rome. In 147 a Roman embassy was sent to intervene in the affairs of the league by supporting the secession of Sparta and also by calling for the detachment of [Corinth](https://www.britannica.com/place/Corinth-Greece) and Argos from the league. The embassy provoked a violent reply. When further negotiations were blocked by Critolaus, Rome declared war on the Achaeans in 146, citing as reason the ill-treatment of their embassy. Metellus (now with the appellation of “Macedonicus”), having delayed with his army, marched against Critolaus and defeated him in Locris. Then [Lucius Mummius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucius-Mummius) Archaicus, consul of 146, took over the command and defeated Diaeus and the remaining Achaeans. The Senate ordered Mummius to teach a lesson to the Greeks: the venerable city of Corinth was sacked, its treasures taken to Rome, and its buildings burned to the ground.

The nature of Roman domination in the East began to change decisively after these wars: in place of influence through embassies, arbitration of disputes, and the occasional military incursion came direct rule. Macedonia was annexed as a [province](https://www.britannica.com/topic/province-ancient-Roman-government), to be governed and taxed by a Roman proconsul, who also watched over the Greek cities to the south, where the leagues were disbanded. Farther east, the kingdom of Pergamum was added as the province of Asia, as a [bequest](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bequest) to the Roman people from Attalus III in 133.

# Roman expansion in the western Mediterranean

If Roman military intervention in the east was sporadic in the 2nd century, campaigning in northern [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy) and Spain was nearly continuous. During [Hannibal’s](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hannibal-Carthaginian-general-247-183-BC) invasion of Italy, the [Insubres](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Insubres) and [Boii](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Boii), Gallic peoples in the Po valley, had joined the Carthaginians against [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome). In 200 the [Gauls](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gaul-people) and [Ligurians](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ligurian) combined forces and sacked the Latin [colony](https://www.britannica.com/topic/colony-ancient-Roman-settlement) of Placentia in an attempt to drive the Romans out of their lands. In the following years consular armies repeatedly attacked the Gauls. In 194 [Lucius Valerius Flaccus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucius-Valerius-Flaccus) won a decisive victory over the Insubres, and in 192 the leading Boii under severe pressure went over to the Roman side, signaling the coming defeat of their tribe. Following their victories, the Romans sent thousands of new colonists to the Po valley to reinforce the older colonies of Placentia and Cremona (190) and to establish new colonies, notably [Bononia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bologna-Italy) (189) and [Aquileia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Aquileia) (181).

During the same period the Romans were at war with the Ligurian tribes of the northern Apennines. The serious effort began in 182, when both consular armies and a proconsular army were sent against the Ligurians. The wars continued into the 150s, when victorious generals celebrated two triumphs over the Ligurians. Here also the Romans drove many natives off their land and settled colonies in their stead (e.g., Luna and Luca in the 170s).

As a result of the [Second Punic War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Second-Punic-War), Roman legions had marched into Spain against the Carthaginians and remained there after 201. The Romans formalized their rule in 197 by creating two provinces, [Nearer](https://www.britannica.com/place/Nearer-Spain) and [Further Spain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Further-Spain). They also exploited the Spanish riches, especially the mines, as the Carthaginians had done. In 197 the legions were withdrawn, but a Spanish revolt against the Roman presence led to the death of one governor and required that the two praetorian governors of 196 be accompanied by a [legion](https://www.britannica.com/topic/legion) each. The situation was serious enough for the [consul](https://www.britannica.com/topic/consul-ancient-Roman-official) of 195, [Cato the Censor](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Porcius-Cato-Roman-senator-95-46-BC), to be sent to Spain with two legions. From Cato comes the earliest [extant](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/extant) firsthand account of Roman conquest. His comments show that he prided himself on his bravery and lack of greed as compared with other Roman commanders. Yet his narrative must overstate the extent and decisiveness of his success because fighting persisted for years to come, as later Roman governors sought to extend Roman control over more Spanish peoples—the Celtiberi of northeastern Spain, the Lusitani of modern-day Portugal, and the Vettones and Vaccaei of northwestern Spain. In 177 [Tiiberius Sempronius Gracchus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tiberius-Sempronius-Gracchus) celebrated a triumph over the Celtiberi. The size of the Roman forces was probably then reduced from four to two legions, and from 173 to 155 there was a lull in the regular campaigning. During these decades Spanish peoples brought complaints to Rome about corrupt governors.

Annual warfare resumed in Spain in 154, being perhaps in part a violent reaction to corrupt administration, and dragged on until 133. Labeled a “fiery war” (really wars), these struggles acquired a reputation for extreme cruelty; they brought destruction to the native population (e.g., 20,000 Vaccaei were killed in 151 after giving themselves up to Lucius [Licinius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Licinius) Lucullus) and made recruiting legionaries in Italy difficult. In Further Spain the Lusitanian leader Viriathus enjoyed some successes, including the surrender of a Roman army in 141–140 and a favourable treaty with Rome, but the next governor of the [province](https://www.britannica.com/topic/province-ancient-Roman-government), Quintus Servilius Caepio, arranged for his assassination in 139. Two years later in Nearer Spain, the Numantines also forced the surrender of an army under [Gaius Hostilius Mancinus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaius-Hostilius-Mancinus); the [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history) later disavowed the agreement of equal terms and handed Mancinus, bound and naked, over to the Spaniards to absolve themselves of responsibility before the gods. The wars in Spain were brought to a conclusion in 133 by Publius Cornelius [Scipio Aemilianus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Scipio-Africanus-the-Younger), who took [Numantia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Numantia) after a long siege, enslaved the population, and razed the city.

It was Scipio Aemilianus (born 185/184) who in the previous decade had imposed a similar final solution on Carthage in the [Third Punic War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Third-Punic-War) (149–146). After the Second Punic War, Carthage had recovered to the point that in 191 it offered to repay the remainder of the 50-year tribute of 200 talents per year in one lump sum. Rome’s refusal of the offer suggests that beyond its [monetary](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/monetary) value the tribute had the symbolic importance of signifying subjection. Carthage’s neighbour, the [Numidian](https://www.britannica.com/place/Numidia) king [Masinissa](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Masinissa), had been granted as a reward for his support of Rome at the [Battle of Zama](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Zama-Roman-Carthaginian-history) his paternal kingdom and the western Numidian kingdom ruled by Syphax. During the next half century Masinissa periodically tried to exploit his favour in Rome by [encroaching](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/encroaching) on Carthaginian territory. Initially, the Carthaginians submissively sought the arbitration of Rome in these disputes, but more often than not Roman judgment went in favour of Masinissa. After a series of losses, the Carthaginians in 151 decided to act on their own and raised an army to ward off the Numidian attacks. When a Roman delegation observed the Carthaginian army raised in [breach](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/breach) of the treaty of 201, Rome was provided with the [casus belli](https://www.britannica.com/topic/casus-belli) for a declaration of war in 149; [Polybius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Polybius), however, claims that the Senate had decided on this war “long before.” The elderly Cato had been ending his speeches in the Senate since 153 with the [notorious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/notorious) exhortation that “Carthage must be destroyed.” Carthage desperately and pathetically tried to make [amends](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/amends), executing the generals of the expedition against the Numidians, surrendering to Rome, and handing over hostages, armour, and artillery. Only then did the Romans deliver their final demand: Carthage must be abandoned and the population moved to a new site inland. Such extreme terms could not be accepted.

The war against Carthage, with its prospects of rich booty, presented no recruiting problems for the Romans: huge land and naval forces were sent out under both consuls of 149, Lucius Marcius Censorinus and Manius Manilius. The imbalance of resources meant that the outcome was never in doubt, but the [fortifications](https://www.britannica.com/technology/fortification) of Carthage delayed the Roman victory. The young Scipio Aemilianus was elected consul for 147, and by popular vote he was assigned the task of bringing the war to an end. He blockaded the city by land and sea, inflicting terrible suffering. Finally, in 146, the Roman army took [Carthage](https://www.britannica.com/place/Carthage-ancient-city-Tunisia), enslaved its remaining 50,000 inhabitants, burned the buildings to the ground, and ritually sowed the site with salt to guarantee that nothing would ever grow there again. Carthaginian territory was annexed as the province of Africa.

## Explanations of Roman expansion

As one of the decisive developments in western history, Roman expansion has invited continual reinterpretation by historians. Polybius, who wrote his history in [order](https://www.britannica.com/technology/order-architecture) to explain to other Greeks the reasons for Roman success, believed that after their victory over Hannibal the Romans conceived the aim of dominating all before them and set out to achieve it in the Second Macedonian War. If one accepts the Roman view that they fought only “[just wars](https://www.britannica.com/topic/just-war)”—that is, only when provoked—then Roman conquest emerges as “one of the most important accidents in European history,” as Rome had to defend itself from threats on all sides. Historians have suggested other motives for [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science), such as a desire to profit from war, an interest in commercial expansion, or a love of the Greeks, who asked for protection against Hellenistic monarchs.

Major historical phenomena of this kind rarely receive final, decisive interpretations, but several assertions may be ventured. Some of the interpretations are anachronistic impositions on the ancient world. Ancient testimony, for example, gives no support to commercial or mercantile explanations. Cultural and economic interpretations seem more appropriate. Roman [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture) placed a high value on success in war: virtus (courage and qualities of leadership) was displayed, above all, in war, and the triumph, a parade through Rome celebrating a major victory over an enemy, was the honour most highly prized by the senatorial generals who guided Roman decisions about war and peace. Moreover, these leaders, and the whole Roman people, were fully aware of the increasing profits of victory; in the 2nd century commanders and soldiers, as well as the city itself, were enriched by the glittering booty from Africa and the Greek East.

Yet, it is rightly pointed out, Roman intervention in the East was sporadic, not systematic, and the Romans did not annex territory in the [Balkans](https://www.britannica.com/place/Balkans), [Anatolia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Anatolia), or [North Africa](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa) for more than 50 years after their initial victories. The latter point, however, is not telling, since the Romans regarded defeated states allied to them as part of their imperium, whether or not they were under Roman provincial administration. The sporadic timing of the wars would seem to support the Romans’ claim that they only reacted, justly, to provocations. But attention to the individual provocations should not blind the historian to the larger pattern of Roman behaviour. From 218 the Romans annually fielded major armies decade after decade. Rome was able to go to war every year in response to provocations only because it chose to define its interests and make alliances farther and farther afield. Polybius, as noted, reveals how the Romans were the masters of manipulation of circumstances to force opponents to behave in a way they could interpret as provocative. Therefore, the Roman interpretation of “just wars” and the Polybian interpretation of a universal aim to conquer need not be contradictory. The concept of “just war” may have justified any given war but does not explain the perpetual Roman readiness to go to war. For that the historian must look to Polybius’s universal aim or to general political, social, economic, and cultural features of Rome. Finally, it must be remembered that in some instances it was clearly the Roman commander who provoked the war in order to plunder and to win a triumph (e.g., Licinius Lucullus, governor of Nearer Spain, in 151).

## Beginnings of provincial administration

Rome dominated its Latin and Italian neighbours by incorporating some into the Roman citizen body and by forming bilateral alliances with most of the Italian city-states. After the [Punic Wars](https://www.britannica.com/event/Punic-Wars), Rome undertook to rule newly acquired territories directly as subject provinces. In 241 [Sicily](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sicily) became Rome’s first province, followed by Sardinia-Corsica in 238, and Spain, divided into two provinces, in 197. After a 50-year [hiatus](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hiatus), Macedonia and [Africa](https://www.britannica.com/place/Africa) were annexed in 146, and the province of [Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Asia-ancient-Roman-province) (northwestern Anatolia) in 133. In principle, each province was to be administered in accordance with its [*lex provinciae*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/lex-provinciae), a set of rules drawn up by the conquering commander and a senatorial embassy. The lex provinciae laid down the organization of [taxation](https://www.britannica.com/topic/taxation), which varied from province to province.

The provincial administrative apparatuses were minimal and unprofessional, as the Romans relied heavily on the local elites as mediators. Each year a senatorial magistrate was sent out to govern with nearly unfettered powers. Because initially the governors were usually praetors, the addition of new provinces required the election of more praetors (increased to four in 227 and to six in 197). The assignments to provinces were done by lot. The [governor](https://www.britannica.com/technology/governor-machine-component) took with him one of the [quaestors](https://www.britannica.com/topic/quaestor-ancient-Roman-official) to oversee the finances of provincial government and senatorial friends and relatives to serve as deputies and advisors ([*legati*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/legate-Roman-official)). Among the humbler functionaries assisting the governor were scribes to keep records and lictors with fasces (bundles of rods and axes) to symbolize gubernatorial authority and to execute sentences pronounced by the governor in criminal cases.

The governor’s main duties were to maintain order and security and to collect revenues. The former often entailed command of an army to ward off external threats and to suppress internal disorders such as banditry. When not commanding his army, the governor spent his time hearing legal cases and [arbitrating disputes](https://www.britannica.com/topic/arbitration). During the republic, revenue collection was left to private companies of [*publicani*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/publican), so called because they won by highest bid the contract to collect the revenues. It was the governor’s responsibility to keep the publicani within the bounds of the lex provinciae so that they did not exploit the helpless provincials too mercilessly, but this was difficult. Governors expected to make a profit from their term of office, and some [collaborated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/collaborated) with the publicani to strip the provinces of their wealth

# Formation of Rome and Italy during the Middle Republic

The Greek historian [Polybius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Polybius) admired [Rome’s](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome) balanced constitution, [discipline](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discipline), and strict religious observance as the bases of the republic’s success and stability. Yet Rome’s very successes in the 2nd century undermined these features, leading to profound changes in the republic’s politics, [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture), economy, and society.

## [Citizenship](https://www.britannica.com/topic/citizenship) and politics in the middle republic

The Romans organized their citizenry in a way that permitted expansion. This was regarded as a source of strength by contemporaries such as Philip V, who noted that Rome replenished its citizen ranks with freed slaves. The extension of citizenship continued in the early 2nd century, as in the grant of full citizen rights to Arpinum, Formiae, and Fundi in 188. Yet Rome’s glittering successes made such openness ever more problematic. For one, the city attracted increasing numbers of Latins and allies, who wished to use their ancient right to migrate and take up Roman citizenship. The depletion of Latin and Italian towns prompted protests, until in 177 Rome took away the right of migration and forced Latin and Italian migrants to return to their hometowns to register for military service. Such measures were sporadically repeated in the following years. In addition, the flood of slaves into Rome from the great conquests increased the flow of foreign-born freedmen into the citizen body. Sempronius [Gracchus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaius-Sempronius-Gracchus) (father of the famous [tribunes](https://www.britannica.com/topic/tribune-Roman-official)) won senatorial [approbation](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/approbation) as [censor](https://www.britannica.com/topic/censor-ancient-Roman-official) in 168 by registering the freedmen in a single urban tribe and thus limiting their electoral influence. Despite these efforts, the nature and meaning of Roman citizenship were bound to change, as the citizen body became ever more diffuse and lived dispersed from Rome, the only place where the right of suffrage could be exercised.

Polybius greatly admired Rome’s balanced constitution, with its elements of monarchy (magistrates), [aristocracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aristocracy) (Senate), and [democracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/democracy) (popular assemblies). According to Greek political theory, each form of constitution was believed to be unstable and susceptible to decline until replaced by another. Yet Rome’s system of balance, Polybius thought, was a check on the cycle of decline. By forcing the Roman constitution into the mold of Greek political theory, however, he exaggerated the symmetry of [checks and balances](https://www.britannica.com/topic/checks-and-balances). In reality, the [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history) enjoyed a period of steady domination through the first two-thirds of the 2nd century, having emerged from the [Second Punic War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Second-Punic-War) with high [prestige](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prestige). Only occasionally did the developing tensions and contradictions surface during these decades.

Politics during the period was largely a matter of senatorial families competing for high office and the ensuing lucrative commands. Because offices were won in the centuriate and tribal assemblies, senators had to [cultivate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultivate) support among the populus. Yet the system was not as democratic as it might appear. Senators with illustrious names and consular ancestors dominated the election to the highest offices, increasing their share of the consulates from about one-half to two-thirds during the 2nd century. These proportions can be interpreted in two ways: the Senate was not a closed, hereditary aristocracy but was open to new families, who usually rose through the senatorial ranks in the course of generations with the patronal support of established families; yet a small circle of prominent families (e.g., the Aemilii, Claudii, and Cornelii) were disproportionately successful, surprisingly so in view of the popular electoral process. Since the campaigning was not oriented toward issues, the great families were able to maintain their superiority over the centuries by their inherited resources: their famous names, their wealth, and their [clienteles](https://www.britannica.com/topic/clientship) of voters.

While aristocratic electoral competition was tradition during the republic, this period began to exhibit the escalation in competitiveness that was later fatal to the republic. For example, [Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Scipio-Africanus) emerged from the Second Punic War as the Roman whose dignitas (prestige) far surpassed that of his peers. Nonetheless, a number of senators attacked him and his brother Lucius Cornelius with legal charges until he finally retired from Rome to end his life at his Campanian [villa](https://www.britannica.com/technology/villa-dwelling) at Liternum. For younger senators, however, Scipio’s spectacular achievement was something to emulate. The ambitious young Flamininus moved swiftly through the senatorial [*cursus honorum*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/cursus-honorum) (“course of honors”) to win the consulship and command against Philip V at the age of 30. Such cases prompted laws to regulate the senatorial cursus: [iteration](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/iteration) in the same magistracy was prohibited, the praetorship was made a prerequisite for the consulship, and in 180 the lex Villia annalis (Villian law on minimum ages) set minimum ages for senatorial magistrates and required a two-year interval between offices. The consulship (two elected to it per year) could be held from age 42, the praetorship (six per year) from age 39, and the curule aedileship from 36. [Patricians](https://www.britannica.com/topic/patrician), still privileged in this area, were probably allowed to stand for these offices two years earlier. The senatorial career was preceded by 10 years of military service, from age 17, and formally began with a quaestorship, the most junior senatorial magistracy (eight per year), at age 30 or just under. The offices between the quaestorship and praetorship, the aedileship (four per year) and the plebeian tribunate (10 per year), were not compulsory but provided opportunities to win popularity among the voters by staging aedilician games and supporting popular causes, respectively. Here again, excess elicited restraint, and legal limits were placed on the lavishness of the games. More broadly, from 181 legislation designed to curb electoral bribery was intermittently introduced.

The problems of electoral competition did not disappear. In the late 150s second consulships were prohibited altogether, but within decades the rules were broken. [Scipio Aemilianus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Scipio-Africanus-the-Younger), grandson by [adoption](https://www.britannica.com/topic/adoption-kinship) of Scipio Africanus, challenged the system. Returning from the Carthaginian campaign to Rome to stand for the aedileship, he was elected instead to the consulship, even though he was underage and had not held the prerequisite praetorship. He was then elected to a second consulship for 134. Scipio had no subversive intent, but his career set the precedent for [circumventing](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/circumventing) the cursus regulations by appeal to the popular assemblies.

While the 2nd century was a time of heated competition among senators, it was generally a period of quiescence of the plebs and their magistrates, the tribunes. Nevertheless, signs of the upheaval ahead are visible. For one, the long plebeian struggle against arbitrary abuse of magisterial power continued. A series of Porcian laws were passed to protect citizens from summary execution or scourging, asserting the citizen’s right of appeal to the assembly (ius provocationis). A descendant of the Porcian clan later advertised these laws on coins as a victory for freedom. Moreover, the massive annual war effort provoked occasional resistance to military service. In 193 the tribunes started to investigate complaints about overly long military service. Interpreting this as a challenge to magisterial authority, the Senate responded with a declaration of an emergency levy, and the tribunes stopped their activity. In 151 the tribunes tried to protect some citizens from the levy for the unpopular war in Spain. A confrontation between the tribunes and the recruiting [consuls](https://www.britannica.com/topic/consul-ancient-Roman-official) ensued, in which the tribunes briefly imprisoned the consuls until a compromise relieved the crisis. The scene of tribunes taking consuls to jail was repeated in 138 during a period of renewed difficulties over recruiting.

Since the Hortensian law of 287, the plebs had the [constitutional](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constitutional) power to pass laws binding on the entire state without senatorial approval. During the next century and a half few attempts were made to use the power for purposes of major reform against the Senate’s will, in part because the [plebeian tribunes](https://www.britannica.com/topic/plebeian-tribune), as members of the senatorial [order](https://www.britannica.com/technology/order-architecture), generally shared the Senate’s interests and in part because the plebeians benefited from Rome’s great successes abroad under senatorial leadership. Yet senatorial fear of unbridled popular legislative power is perceptible in the Aelian and Fufian law of about 150. This law, imperfectly known from later passing references, provided that a magistrate holding a legislative assembly could be prevented from passing a bill on religious grounds by another magistrate claiming to have witnessed unfavourable omens in a procedure called obnuntiatio. In addition, the days of the year on which legislative assemblies could be held were reduced. As [conservative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conservative) senators worked to restrain the democratic element in the political processes, the plebeians sought to expand their freedom. Voting in electoral and judicial assemblies had been public, allowing powerful senators more easily to manage the votes of their clients. The Gabinian law (139) and Cassian law (137) introduced secret written ballots into the assemblies, thus loosening the control of patrons over their clients. Significantly, the reform was supported by Scipio Aemilianus, the sort of senator who stood to benefit by attracting the clients of other patrons through his personal popularity. These reforms, together with the changing [composition](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/composition) of the electorate in the city, carried the potential, soon to be realized, for more volatile assemblies.

# Culture and religion

Expansion brought [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome) into contact with many [diverse](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diverse) [cultures](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultures). The most important of these was the Greek [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture) in the eastern Mediterranean with its highly refined literature and learning. Rome responded to it with ambivalence: although Greek doctrina was attractive, it was also the culture of the defeated and enslaved. Indeed, much Greek culture was brought to Rome in the aftermath of military victories, as Roman soldiers returned home not only with works of art but also with learned Greeks who had been enslaved. Despite the [ambivalence](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ambivalence), nearly every facet of Roman culture was influenced by the Greeks, and it was a Greco-Roman culture that the Roman [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science) [bequeathed](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bequeathed) to later European civilization.

As Roman aristocrats encountered Greeks in southern [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy) and in the East in the 3rd century, they learned to speak and write in Greek. [Scipio Africanus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Scipio-Africanus) and Flamininus, for example, are known to have corresponded in Greek. By the late republic it became standard for senators to be bilingual. Many were reared from infancy by Greek-speaking slaves and later tutored by Greek slaves or freedmen. Nonetheless, despite their increasing fluency in Greek, senators continued to insist on Latin as the official [language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/language) of government; visiting dignitaries from the East addressing the [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history) in Greek had their speeches translated—as a mark of their subordination.

Because Greek was the [lingua franca](https://www.britannica.com/topic/lingua-franca) of the East, Romans had to use Greek if they wished to reach a wider audience. Thus the first histories by Romans were written in Greek. The [patrician](https://www.britannica.com/topic/patrician) Fabius Pictor, who, as noted above, founded the Roman tradition of historiography during the Second Punic War, wrote his annalistic history of Rome in Greek partly in [order](https://www.britannica.com/technology/order-architecture) to influence Greek views in favour of Rome, and he emphasized Rome’s ancient ties to the Greek world by incorporating in his history the [legend](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/legend) that the Trojan hero [Aeneas](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Aeneas) had settled in Latium. Because Roman history was about politics and war, the writing of history was always judged by Romans to be a suitable pastime for men of politics—i.e., for senators such as Fabius.

Rome had had a folk tradition of poetry in the native [Saturnian verse](https://www.britannica.com/art/Saturnian-verse) with a metre based on stress, but not a formal literature. [Lucius Livius Andronicus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucius-Livius-Andronicus) was regarded as the father of [Latin literature](https://www.britannica.com/art/Latin-literature), a fact that illustrates to what extent the development of Roman literature was bound up with conquest and enslavement. Livius, a native Greek speaker from [Tarentum](https://www.britannica.com/place/Taranto-Italy), was brought as a slave to Rome, where he remained until his death (c. 204). Becoming fluent in Latin, he translated the Homeric Odyssey into Latin in Saturnian verse. Thus Latin literature began with a translation from Greek into the native metre. Livius reached wider audiences through his translations of Greek plays for public performance. [Gnaeus Naevius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gnaeus-Naevius), the next major figure (c. 270–c. 201), was again not a native Roman but an Oscan speaker from Campania. In addition to translating Greek drama, he wrote the first major original work in Latin, an epic poem about the [First Punic War](https://www.britannica.com/event/First-Punic-War). Naevius’ successors, [Quintus Ennius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Quintus-Ennius) from [Calabria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Calabria-ancient-city-Italy) (239–169) and [Titus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Titus) Maccius [Plautus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Plautus) from Umbria (c. 254–184), transformed the Latin poetic [genres](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/genres) by importing Greek metrical forms based on the length of syllables rather than on stress. Ennius was best known for his epic history of Rome in verse, the Annales, but he also wrote tragedies and satires. Plautus produced comedies adapted from Greek [New Comedy](https://www.britannica.com/art/New-Comedy). He is the only early author whose work is well represented in the corpus of surviving literature (21 plays judged authentic by [Marcus Terentius Varro](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Terentius-Varro), Rome’s greatest scholar). None of the plays of his younger contemporaries, Caecilius [Statius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Statius) (c. 210–168) and [Marcus Pacuvius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Pacuvius) (c. 220–130), survive, nor do the once highly esteemed tragedies of [Lucius Accius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucius-Accius) (170–c. 86). The six [extant](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/extant) comedies of [Terence](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Terence) (Publius Terentius Afer; c. 190–159) provide a sense of the variation in the comic tradition of the 2nd century. These authors also were outsiders, coming from the Celtic Po valley, Brundisium, Umbria, and [North Africa](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa), respectively. Thus, while assorted foreigners, some of servile origin, established a Latin literature by adapting Greek genres, metrical forms, and content, native Roman senators began to write history in Greek.

Other forms of Greek learning were slower to take root in Rome. Later Romans remembered that a [Greek](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Greek-philosophy) doctor established a practice in Rome for the first time just before the Second Punic War, but his reputation did little to stimulate Roman interest in the subject. Like doctors, Greek philosophers of the 2nd century were regarded with interest and suspicion. In the early 3rd century Romans had erected in public a statue of Pythagoras, a 6th-century Greek philosopher who had founded [communities](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/communities) of philosophers in southern Italy. In the mid-2nd century some senators displayed an interest in philosophy. [Scipio Aemilianus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Scipio-Africanus-the-Younger), [Gaius Laelius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaius-Laelius) (consul 140), and Lucius Furius Philus (consul 136) were among those who listened to the lectures of the three leaders of the Athenian philosophical schools visiting Rome on a diplomatic mission in 155—the academic Carneades, the peripatetic Critolaus, and the [stoic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stoic) Diogenes. On an official visit to the East in 140, Scipio included in his entourage the leading stoic Panaetius. In the same period, another stoic, Blossius of [Cumae](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cumae), was said to have influenced the reforming [tribune](https://www.britannica.com/topic/tribune-Roman-official) [Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tiberius-Sempronius-Gracchus). Yet the philosophical influence should not be exaggerated; none of these senators was a philosopher or even a formal student of philosophy.

Moreover, the sophisticated [rhetoric](https://www.britannica.com/topic/rhetoric) of the philosophers—in 155 Carneades lectured in favour of natural [justice](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/justice) one day and against it the next—was perceived by leading Romans such as [Cato the Censor](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Porcius-Cato-Roman-statesman-234-149-BC) as subversive to good [morals](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/morals). At his urging the Senate quickly concluded the diplomatic business of Carneades, Critolaus, and Diogenes in 155 and hurried them out of Rome. This was part of a broader pattern of hostility to philosophy: in 181 the (spurious) Books of Numa, falsely believed to have been influenced by Pythagoras, were burned, and the following decades witnessed several expulsions of philosophers from the city. In comedies of the period, the [discipline](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discipline) was held up for ridicule.

The hostility toward philosophy was one aspect of a wider Roman sense of unease about changing mores. Cato, a “new man” (without senatorial ancestors) elected [consul](https://www.britannica.com/topic/consul-ancient-Roman-official) (195) and censor (184), represented himself as an [austere](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/austere) champion of the old ways and exemplifies the hardening Roman reaction against change under foreign influence. Although Cato knew Greek and could [deploy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/deploy) [allusions](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/allusions) to [Greek literature](https://www.britannica.com/art/Greek-literature), he advised his son against too deep a knowledge of the literature of that “most worthless and unteachable race.” Cato despised those senatorial colleagues who ineptly imitated Greek manners. He asserted the value of Latin culture in the role of father of Latin prose literature. His [treatise](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/treatise) on estate management, the De agricultura (c. 160), has survived with its rambling discourse about how to run a 200-iugera (124-acre) farm, including advice on everything from buying and selling slaves to folk medicine. Cato’s greater, historical work, the Origines, survives only in fragments: it challenged the earlier Roman histories insofar as it was written in Latin and emphasized the achievements of the Italian peoples rather than those of the few great senatorial families of Rome (whose names were conspicuously omitted).

Elected censor in 184 to protect Roman mores, Cato vowed “to cut into pieces and burn like a hydra all luxury and voluptuousness.” He expelled seven men from the Senate on various charges of immorality and penalized through taxation the acquisition of such luxuries as expensive clothing, jewelry, carriages, and fancy slaves. The worry about luxury was widespread, as evidenced by the passage of a series of sumptuary laws supported by Cato. During the depths of the Second Punic War the [Oppian law](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lex-Oppia) (215) was passed to meet the financial crisis by restricting the jewelry and clothing women were allowed to wear; in 195, after the crisis, the law was repealed despite Cato’s protests. Later sumptuary laws were motivated not by military crisis but by a sense of the dangers of luxury: the [Orchian law](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lex-Orchia) (182) limited the lavishness of banquets; the Fannian law (161) strengthened the Orchian provisions, and the Didian law (143) extended the limits to all Italy. A similar sense of the dangers of wealth may also have prompted the [*lex Voconia*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lex-Voconia) (169), which prohibited Romans of the wealthiest class from naming women as heirs in their wills.

The laws and censorial actions ultimately could not restrain changes in Roman mores. Economic conditions had been irreversibly altered by conquest; the magnitude of [conspicuous consumption](https://www.britannica.com/topic/conspicuous-consumption) is suggested by a senatorial decree of 161 that restricted the weight of silver tableware in a banquet to 100 pounds—10 times the weight for which Publius Cornelius [Rufinus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Rufinus) was punished in 275. Moreover, the very competitiveness that had traditionally marked the senatorial [aristocracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aristocracy) ensured the spread of cultural [innovations](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/innovations) and new forms of [conspicuous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conspicuous) [consumption](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/consumption) among the elite. In contrast to the austere Cato, other senators laid claim to [prestige](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prestige) by collecting Greek art and books brought back by conquering armies, by staging plays modeled on Greek drama, and by commissioning literary works, public buildings, and private sculptural monuments in a Greek style.

Whereas the influence of Greek high culture was felt principally in a small circle of elite Romans who had the wealth to acquire Greek art and slaves and the leisure and education to read Greek authors, the influence of religions from the eastern Mediterranean was perceived as potentially subversive to a far wider audience. [Polybius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Polybius) praised the Romans for their [conscientious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conscientious) behaviour toward the gods. Romans were famous for their extreme precision in recitation of vows and performance of sacrifices to the gods, meticulously repeating [archaic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/archaic) words and actions centuries after their original meanings had been forgotten. Guiding these state cults were priestly colleges; and priestly offices such as of pontifex and [augur](https://www.britannica.com/topic/augur) were filled by senators, whose dominance in politics was thus replicated in civic religion.

In earlier centuries Rome’s innate religious [conservatism](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conservatism) was, however, counterbalanced by an openness to foreign gods and cults. As Rome incorporated new peoples of Italy into its citizen body, it accepted their gods and religious practices. Indeed, among the most [authoritative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/authoritative) religious texts, consulted in times of crisis or doubt, were the prophetic Sibylline Books, written in Greek and imported from Cumae. The receptivity appears most pronounced in the 3rd century: during its final decades temples were built in the city for Venus Erycina from [Sicily](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sicily) and for the [Magna Mater](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Great-Mother-of-the-Gods), or Great Mother, from Pessinus in Anatolia; games were instituted in honour of the Greek god [Apollo](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Apollo-Greek-mythology) (212) and the Magna Mater after the war. The new cults were [integrated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/integrated) into the traditional structure of the state religion, and the “foreignness” was controlled (i.e., limits were placed on the orgiastic elements in the cult of the Great Mother performed by her eunuch priests).

The openness, never complete or a matter of principle, tilted toward resistance in the early 2nd century. In 186 Roman magistrates, on orders from the Senate, brutally suppressed Bacchic worship in Italy. Associations of worshipers of the Greek god Bacchus ([Dionysus](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dionysus)) had spread across Italy to Rome. Their members, numbering in the thousands, were initiated into secret mysteries, knowledge of which promised life after death; they also engaged in orgiastic worship. The secrecy soon gave rise to reports of the basest activities, such as uncontrolled drinking, sexual promiscuity, forgery of wills, and poisoning of [kin](https://www.britannica.com/topic/kinship). According to [Livy](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Livy), more than 7,000 were implicated in the wrongdoing; many of them were tried and executed, and the consuls destroyed the places of Bacchic worship throughout Italy. For the future, the (extant) senatorial decree prohibited men from acting as priests in the cult, banned secret meetings, and required the [praetor’s](https://www.britannica.com/topic/praetor) and Senate’s authorization of ceremonies to be performed by gatherings of more than five people. The terms of the decree provide a sense of what provoked the harsh senatorial reaction. It was not that the Bacchic cult spread heretical beliefs about the gods—Roman civic religion was never based on theological doctrine with pretensions to [exclusive](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/exclusive) truth; rather, the growing secret cult led by male priests threatened the traditionally dominant position of senators in state religion. The decree did not aim to eliminate Bacchic worship but to bring it under the supervision of senatorial authorities. The following centuries witnessed sporadic official actions against foreign cults; it happens to be recorded that a praetor of 139 removed private altars built in public areas and expelled astrologers and Jews from the city. Thus the reaction to eastern religions paralleled that to Greek philosophy; both were perceived as new ways of thinking that threatened to undermine traditional mores and the relations of authority [implicit](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/implicit) in them.

## Demographic and economic developments

It seems certain that the economy and society of Italy were transformed in the wake of Rome’s conquest of the Mediterranean world, even though the changes can be described only incompletely and imprecisely, owing to the dearth of reliable information for the preceding centuries. Romans of the 1st century BC believed that their ancestors had been a people of small farmers in an age uncorrupted by wealth. Even senators who performed heroic feats were said to have been of modest means—men such as Lucius Quinctius Cinncinatus, who was said to have laid down his plow on his tiny farm to serve as [dictator](https://www.britannica.com/topic/dictator-Roman-official) in 458 BC. Although such [legends](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/legends) present an idealized vision of early Rome, it is probably true that Latium of the 5th and 4th centuries was densely populated by farmers of small plots. Rome’s military strength derived from its superior resources of manpower levied from a pool of small landowning citizens (assidui). A dense population is also suggested by the emigration from [Latium](https://www.britannica.com/place/Latium) of scores of thousands as colonists during the 4th and 3rd centuries. The legends of senators working their own fields seem implausible, but the disparity in wealth was probably much less noticeable than in the late republic. The 4th-century [artifacts](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/artifacts) uncovered by archaeologists display an overall high quality that makes it difficult to distinguish a category of luxury goods from the pottery and terra-cottas made for common use.

War and conquest altered this picture; yet certain fundamental features of the economy remained constant. Until its fall, the Roman Empire retained agriculture as the basis of its economy, with probably four-fifths of the population tilling the soil. This great majority continued to be needed in food production because there were no labour-saving technological breakthroughs. The power driving agricultural and other production was almost entirely supplied by humans and animals, which set modest limits to [economic growth](https://www.britannica.com/topic/economic-growth). In some areas of Italy, such as the territory of [Capena](https://www.britannica.com/place/Capena) in southern Etruria, archaeologists have found traditional patterns of settlement and land division continuing from the 4th to the end of the 1st century—evidence that the [Second Punic War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Second-Punic-War) and the following decades did not bring a complete break with the past.

Economic change came as a result of massive population shifts and the social reorganization of labour rather than technological improvement. The Second Punic War, and especially [Hannibal’s](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hannibal-Carthaginian-general-247-183-BC) persistent presence in Italy, inflicted a considerable toll, including loss of life on a staggering scale, movement of rural populations into towns, and destruction of agriculture in some regions. Although the devastation has been overestimated by some historians, partial depopulation of the Italian countryside is evident from the literary and archaeological records: immediately after the war enough land stood vacant in Apulia and Samnium to settle between 30,000 and 40,000 of Scipio’s veterans, while areas of Apulia, Bruttium, southern Campania, and south-central Etruria have yielded no artifacts indicating settlement in the postwar period.

Populations have been known to show great [resilience](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resilience) in recovering from wars, but the Italian population was given no peace after 201. In subsequent decades Rome’s annual war effort required a military mobilization unmatched in history for its duration and the proportion of the population involved. During the 150 years after Hannibal’s surrender, the Romans regularly fielded armies of more than 100,000 men, requiring on average about 13 percent of the adult male citizens each year. The attested casualties from 200 to 150 add up to nearly 100,000. The levy took Roman peasants away from their land. Many never returned. Others, perhaps 25,000, were moved in the years before 173 from peninsular Italy to the colonies of the Po valley. Still others, in unknown but considerable numbers, migrated to the cities. By the later 2nd century some Roman leaders perceived the countryside to be depopulated.

To replace the peasants on the land of central and southern Italy, slaves were imported in vast numbers. [Slavery](https://www.britannica.com/topic/slavery-sociology) was well established as a form of agricultural labour before the [Punic Wars](https://www.britannica.com/event/Punic-Wars) (slaves must have produced much of the food during the peak mobilization of citizens from 218 to 201). The scale of slavery, however, increased in the 2nd and 1st centuries as a result of conquests. Enslavement was a common fate for the defeated in ancient warfare: the Romans enslaved 5,000 Macedonians in 197; 5,000 Histri in 177; 150,000 Epirotes in 167; 50,000 Carthaginians in 146; and in 174 an unspecified number of Sardinians, but so many that “Sardinian” became a byword for “cheap” slave. These are only a few examples for which the sources happen to give numbers. More slaves flooded into Italy after Rome destabilized the eastern Mediterranean in 167 and gave pirates and bandits the opportunity to carry off local peoples of Anatolia and sell them on the block at Delos by the thousands. By the end of the republic Italy was a thoroughgoing slave society with well over one million slaves, according to the best estimates. No census figures give numbers of slaves, but slaveholding was more widespread and on a larger scale than in the [antebellum](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/antebellum) American South, where slaves made up about one-third of the population. In effect, Roman soldiers fought in order to capture their own replacements on the land in Italy, although the shift from free to servile labour was only a partial one.

The influx of slaves was accompanied by changes in patterns of landownership, as more Italian land came to be concentrated in fewer hands. One of the punishments meted out to disloyal allies after the Second Punic War was confiscation of all or part of their territories. Most of the ager Campanus and part of the Tarentines’ lands—perhaps two million acres in total—became Roman [*ager publicus*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/ager-publicus) (public land), subject to rent. Some of this property remained in the hands of local peoples, but large tracts in excess of the 500-iugera limit were occupied by wealthy Romans, who were legally possessores (i.e., in possession of the land, although not its owners) and as such paid a [nominal](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nominal) rent to the Roman state. The trend toward concentration continued during the 2nd century, propelled by conquests abroad. On the one side, subsistence farmers were always [vulnerable](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vulnerable) in years of poor harvests that could lead to debt and ultimately to the loss of their plots. The vulnerability was [exacerbated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/exacerbated) by army service, which took peasants away from their farms for years at a time. On the other side, the elite orders were enriched by the booty from the eastern kingdoms on a scale previously unimaginable. Some of the vast new wealth was spent on [public works](https://www.britannica.com/technology/public-utility) and on new forms of luxury and part was invested to secure future income. Land was the preferred form of investment for senators and other honourable men: farming was regarded as safer and more prestigious than manufacture or trade. For senators, the opportunities for trade were limited by the [Claudian law](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lex-Claudia) of 218 prohibiting them from owning large ships. Wealthy Romans thus used the proceeds of war to buy out their smaller neighbours. As a result of this process of acquisition, most senatorial estates consisted of scattered small farms. The [notorious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/notorious) [*latifundia*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/latifundium), the extensive consolidated estates, were not widespread. Given the dispersion of the property, the new landlord was typically absentee. He could leave the working of the farms in the hands of the previous peasant owners as tenants, or he could import slaves.

The best insights into the mentality of the estate-owning class of this period come from Cato’s [*De agricultura*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/De-agri-cultura). Although based on Greek handbooks discussing estate management, it reflects the assumptions and thinking of a 2nd-century senator. Cato [envisaged](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/envisaged) a medium-sized, 200-iugera farm with a permanent staff of 11 slaves. As with other Roman enterprises, management of the farm was left to a slave bailiff, who was helped by his slave wife. While Cato, like the later agricultural writers Varro and Lucius Junius Columella, assumed the economic advantage of a slave [work force](https://www.britannica.com/topic/labor-in-economics), historians today debate whether estates worked by slaves were indeed more profitable than smaller peasant farms. Cato had his slaves use much the same technology as the peasants, although a larger estate could afford large processing [implements](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/implements), such as grape and [olive](https://www.britannica.com/plant/olive-plant) crushers, which peasants might have to share or do without. Nor did Cato bring to bear any innovative management advice; his suggestions aimed to maximize profits by such commonsense means as keeping the slave work force occupied all year round and buying cheap and selling dear. Nevertheless, larger estates had one significant advantage in that the [slave labour](https://www.britannica.com/topic/forced-labour) could be bought and sold and thus more easily matched to labour needs than was possible on small plots worked by peasant families.

Cato’s farm was a model representing one aspect of the reality of the Italian countryside. Archaeologists have discovered the villas characteristic of the Catonian estate beginning to appear in Campania in the 2nd century and later in other areas. The emergence of slave agriculture did not exclude the continuing existence in the area of peasants as owners of marginal land or as casual day labourers or both. The larger estates and the remaining peasants formed a symbiotic relationship, mentioned by Cato: the estate required extra hands to help during peak seasons, while the peasants needed the extra wages from day labour to supplement the meagre production of their plots. Yet in many areas of Italy the [villa](https://www.britannica.com/technology/villa-dwelling) system made no inroads during the republic, and traditional peasant farming continued. Other areas, however, underwent a drastic change: the desolation left by the Second Punic War in the central and southern regions opened the way for wealthy Romans to acquire vast tracts of depopulated land to convert to grazing. This form of [extensive agriculture](https://www.britannica.com/topic/extensive-agriculture) produced cattle, sheep, and goats, herded by slaves. These were the true latifundia, decried as wastelands by Roman imperial authors such as the elder Pliny.

The marketplace took on a new importance as both the Catonian estate and the latifundium aimed primarily to produce goods to sell for a profit. In this sense, they represented a change from peasant agriculture, which aimed above all to feed the peasant’s [family](https://www.britannica.com/topic/family-kinship). The buyers of the new commodities were the growing cities—another facet of the complex economic transformation. Rome was swelled by migrants from the countryside and became the largest city of preindustrial Europe, with a population of about one million in the imperial era; other Italian cities grew to a lesser extent.

The mass of consumers created new, more diverse demands for foodstuffs from the countryside and also for manufactured goods. The [market](https://www.britannica.com/topic/market) was bipolar, with the poor of the cities able to buy only basic foodstuffs and a few plain manufactured items and the rich demanding increasingly extravagant luxury goods. The limitations of the poor are reflected in the declining quality of humble temple offerings. The craftsmen and traders produced mainly for the rich minority. The trading and artisanal enterprises in Rome were largely worked by slaves and freedmen imported to Rome by the wealthy. Although honourable, freeborn Romans considered it beneath their dignity to participate directly in these businesses, they willingly shared in the profits through ownership of these slaves and through collection of rents on the shops of humbler men. Thus, manufacturing and trading were generally small-scale operations, organized on the basis of household or family. [Roman law](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-law) did not recognize business corporations with the exception of publican companies holding state contracts; nor were there guilds of the [medieval](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/medieval) type to organize or control production. Unlike some later medieval cities, Rome did not produce for export to support itself; its revenues came from booty, provincial taxes, and the surplus brought from the countryside to the city by aristocratic Roman landlords. Indeed, after 167 provincial revenues were sufficient to allow for the abolition of direct taxes on Roman citizens.

Building projects were the largest enterprises in Rome and offered freeborn immigrants jobs as day labourers. In addition to the private building needed to house the growing population, the early and middle 2nd century witnessed public building on a new scale and in new shapes. The leading senatorial families gained publicity by sponsoring major new buildings named after themselves in the Forum and elsewhere. The Basilica Porcia (built during Marcus Porcius Cato’s censorship of 184), the Basilica Aemilia et Fulvia (179), and the Basilica Sempronia (170–169) were constructed out of the traditional tufa blocks but in a Hellenized style.

New [infrastructures](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/infrastructures) were required to bring the necessities of life to the growing population. The Porticus Aemilia (193), a warehouse of 300,000 square feet on the banks of the Tiber, illustrates how the new needs were met with a major new building technology, concrete construction. Around 200 BC in central Italy it was discovered that a wet mixture of crushed stone, lime, and sand (especially a volcanic sand called pozzolana) would set into a material of great strength. This construction technique had great advantages of economy and flexibility over the traditional cut-stone technique: the materials were more readily available, the concrete could be molded into desired shapes, and the molds could be reused for repetitive production. The Porticus Aemilia, for example, consisted of a series of roughly identical arches and vaults—the shapes so characteristic of later Roman architecture. The new technology also permitted improvements in the construction of the aqueducts needed to increase the city’s [water supply](https://www.britannica.com/science/water-supply).

The economic development outside of Rome [encompassed](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/encompassed) some fairly large-scale manufacturing enterprises and export trade. At [Puteoli](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pozzuoli) on the [Bay of Naples](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bay-of-Naples) the ironworks industry was organized on a scale well beyond that of the household, and its goods were shipped beyond the area. Puteoli flourished during the republic as a port city, handling imports destined for Rome as well as exports of manufactured goods and processed agricultural products. In their search for markets, the large Italian landowners exported wine and [olive oil](https://www.britannica.com/topic/olive-oil) to [Cisalpine Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cisalpine-Gaul) and more distant locations. Dressel I amphoras, the three-foot pottery jars carrying these products, have been found in substantial quantities in Africa and [Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe). Yet the magnitude of the economic development should not be exaggerated: the ironworks industry was exceptional, and most pottery production continued to be for local use.

# Social changes

Major social changes and dislocations accompanied the [demographic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/demographic) shifts and economic development. Relations between rich and poor in [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome) had traditionally been structured by the bond existing between patron and client. In the daily morning ritual of the salutatio, humble Romans went to pay their respects in the houses of senators, who were obligated to protect them. These personal relationships lent stability to the social [hierarchy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hierarchy). In the 2nd century, however, the disparity between rich and poor citizens grew. While this trend increased the personal power of individual senators, it weakened the social control of the elite as a whole; the poor had become too numerous to be controlled by the traditional bond of patron and [client](https://www.britannica.com/topic/clientship).

Until the end of the 170s the impoverishment of humble citizens had been counterbalanced to some extent by the founding of colonies, because dispossessed peasants were given new lands in outlying regions. During the middle decades of the 2nd century, however, colonization ceased, and the number of dispossessed increased, to judge from the declining number of small landowners in the census. The problem created by a growing proletariat was recognized by a few senators. [Gaius Laelius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaius-Laelius), probably during his consulship of 140, proposed a scheme of land redistribution to renew the class of smallholders, but it was rejected by the [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history).

Some of the dispossessed went to Rome, where, together with the increasing numbers of slaves and freedmen, they contributed to the steadily growing population. This density led to the miseries associated with big cities, which were [exacerbated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/exacerbated) by the absence of regulation. By 200 BC the pressure of numbers necessitated apartment buildings of three stories. Constructed without a [building code](https://www.britannica.com/topic/building-code), these structures were often unsound and prone to collapse. Moreover, closely placed and partly made of wood, they were tinderboxes, ever ready to burst into flame. The population density also increased the vulnerability to food shortages and plagues. In 188 fines were levied against dealers for withholding grain, attesting to problems of supply. The 180s and 170s witnessed repeated outbreaks of plague. The state, which could use its power to increase the grain supply, was helpless against diseases. In general, the republican state developed few new institutions to manage the growing urban problems: until the reign of [Augustus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-Roman-emperor) matters were left to the traditional authority of urban magistrates, who were unaided by a standing fire brigade or police force. Consequently, Rome held an increasing potential for social discontent and conflicts without a corresponding increase in means of control.

The [family](https://www.britannica.com/topic/family-kinship), regarded by Romans as a mainstay of the social [order](https://www.britannica.com/technology/order-architecture), also was affected by the wider economic and social transformations of the 2nd century BC. In the early republic the family had formed a social, economic, and legal unity. The woman generally married into her husband’s family and came under his legal authority (or that of his father if he was still alive), and her dowry merged with the rest of the estate under the ownership of the husband. The husband managed the family’s affairs outside the house, while the wife was custodian within. Marriage was an arrangement for life; divorces were rare and granted only in cases of serious [moral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moral) infractions, such as adultery or wine-tippling on the part of the wife. The children of the couple were subject to the father’s nearly absolute legal powers ([*patria potestas*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/patria-potestas)), including the power of life and death, [corporal punishment](https://www.britannica.com/topic/corporal-punishment), and a monopoly of ownership of all property in the family. The father’s power lasted until his death or, in the case of a daughter, until her marriage. When the father died, his sons, his wife, and his unmarried daughters became legally independent, and all inherited equal shares of the family’s property unless otherwise specified in a will. The imperial authors idealized the early republic as a time of family harmony and stability, which was lost through the corruption of the later republic.

When family life emerged into the full light of history in the 2nd century BC, it had changed in significant ways. A form of marriage, commonly called “free marriage,” was becoming prevalent. Under this form, the wife no longer came into her husband’s power or property regime but remained in that of her father; upon her father’s death she became independent with rights to own and dispose of property. But she was not a member of the family of her husband and children and had no claim to inheritance from them, even though she lived with them in the same house. Because many women inherited part of their fathers’ estates, they could use their independent fortunes to exert influence on husbands, children, and people outside the house. In the same period divorce became far more common; moral infractions were no longer needed to justify divorce, which could be initiated by either side. Frequent divorce and remarriage went hand in hand with the separation of marital property. There is plausibility in the suggestion that these changes were brought on by a desire of the women’s fathers to avoid having their daughters’ portions of the larger family estates slip irrevocably into the hands of their husbands. Although the changes in law and practice were not motivated by any movement to emancipate women, the result was that propertied women of the late republic, always excluded from the public sphere of male citizens, came to enjoy a [degree of freedom](https://www.britannica.com/science/degree-of-freedom-mathematics-and-statistics) and social power unusual before the 20th century.

Slaves came to permeate the fabric of family life and altered relationships within the household. They were regularly assigned the tasks of child-rearing, traditionally the domain of the mother, and of education, until then the responsibility of both the father and the mother. Whereas children had acquired the skills needed for their future roles by observing their parents in a kind of apprenticeship, in wealthy houses sons and, to a lesser extent, daughters were now given a specialized education by slaves or freedmen. The management of aristocratic households was entrusted to slaves and freedmen, who served as secretaries, accountants, and managers. The wife was no longer needed as custodian of the household, though domestic guardianship remained an element in the idealization of her role. Later moralists attributed a decline in Roman virtue and [discipline](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discipline) to the intrusion of slaves into familial relationships and duties.

## Rome and Italy

During the middle republic the peoples of [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy) began to coalesce into a fairly [homogeneous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/homogeneous) and [cohesive](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cohesive) society. [Polybius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Polybius), however, does not give insight into this process, because, living in Rome, he too little appreciated the variety of Italian [cultures](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultures) under Roman sway, from the Gallic peoples in the mountains of the north to the urbane Greeks on the southern coasts. Other evidence, though meagre, nonetheless suggests several processes that contributed to the increasing cohesion.

First, the Romans built a network of roads that [facilitated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/facilitated) communication across Italy. As stated above, the first great road was the [Via Appia](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Appian-Way), which was laid out by [Appius Claudius Caecus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Appius-Claudius-Caecus) in 312 to connect Rome to [Capua](https://www.britannica.com/place/Capua-ancient-city-Italy). Between the First and Second [Punic Wars](https://www.britannica.com/event/Punic-Wars) roads were built to the north: the Via Aurelia (241?) along the Tyrrhenian coast, the Via Flaminia (220) through Umbria, and the Via Clodia through Etruria. Then, in the 2nd century, Roman presence in the Po valley was consolidated by the Via Aemilia (187) from Ariminum on the Adriatic coast to the Latin colony of Placentia and by the Via Postumia (148) running through Transpadane [Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe) to [Aquileia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Aquileia) in the east and Genua in the west.

Second, internal migration—Italians moving to Rome and Romans being sent to Latin [colonies](https://www.britannica.com/topic/colonialism-international-relations) throughout Italy—promoted social and cultural [homogeneity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/homogeneity). Some of these colonies were set alongside existing settlements; others were founded on new sites. The colonies re-created the physical and social shape of Rome; the town plans and architecture, with forums including temples to [Jupiter](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jupiter-Roman-god), were modeled on those of Rome. The imposition of a Latin colony on the Greek city of Paestum in [Lucania](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lucanian) (273) entailed the implantation of a Roman-style [forum](https://www.britannica.com/topic/forum-ancient-Rome) in the centre of the existing city in a way that rudely intruded on the old sanctuary of Hera. The initial system governing the distribution of land to Latin colonists aimed to replicate the Roman social hierarchy [differentiated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/differentiated) by wealth: it is recorded of the colonists sent to Aquileia in 181 that the 3,000 infantrymen each received 50 iugera (31 acres), the centurions 100 iugera (62 acres), and the cavalrymen 140 iugera (86 acres). The unifying effect of the colonies is evident in Paestum’s notable loyalty to Rome during the [Second Punic War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Second-Punic-War).

Third, although Rome did not seek to govern Italy through a regular administration, it influenced local affairs through formal bonds of personal friendship (amicitia) and hospitality (hospitium) between the Roman elite and their local counterparts. Through these ties the leading men of Italy were gradually drawn into the ruling class in Rome. The most prominent example of the 2nd century is that of [Gaius Marius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaius-Marius) of Arpinum, who, only two generations after his town had received full citizen rights, began his meteoric senatorial career under the patronage of the great Roman nobles, the Metelli.

Fourth, the regular military campaigns brought together Romans and Italians of all classes under the command of Roman magistrates. The Italian troops appear to have been levied in a fashion similar to the one used for the Romans, which would have required a Roman-style census as a means of organizing the local citizenries. In the absence of direct administration, military service was the [context](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/context) in which Italians most regularly experienced Roman authority.

Fifth, Rome occasionally [deployed](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/deployed) its troops in Italy to maintain social order. Rome suppressed an uprising of serfs in [Etruscan](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Etruscan) [Volsinii](https://www.britannica.com/place/Volsinii) in 265 and a [sedition](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sedition) in Patavium in 175. When the massive influx of slaves raised the spectre of rebellions across Italy, Roman troops were deployed to put down uprisings: in 195, 5,000 slaves were executed in Latin Setia; in 196 the [praetor](https://www.britannica.com/topic/praetor) was sent with his urban [legion](https://www.britannica.com/topic/legion) to Etruria to fight a pitched battle in which many slaves were killed; and the praetor of 185 dealt with rebellious slaves in Apulia, condemning 7,000 to death. The later slave revolt in [Sicily](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sicily) (c. 135–132) was not contained so effectively and grew to include perhaps 70,000. The slaves defeated the first consular army sent in 134; the efforts of two more consuls were required to restore order. The revolts, unusual for their frequency and size, are not to be explained by abolitionist programs (nonexistent in antiquity) nor by maltreatment. The causes lay in the enslavement and importation of entire [communities](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/communities) with their native leadership and in the free reign given to slave shepherds who roamed armed around the countryside serving as communication lines between slave plantations. These uprisings made it clear that the social fabric of Italy, put under stress by the transformations brought about by conquest, had to be protected by Roman force.

While the exercise of Roman authority and force was sometimes resented by Italians, Rome’s power made its mores and [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture) worthy of imitation. The [Latin language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Latin-language) and Roman political institutions slowly spread. A request from the old Campanian city of [Cumae](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cumae) in 180 that it be allowed to change its official [language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/language) from Oscan to Latin was a sign of things to come.

# The Late Republic (133–31 BC)

## The aftermath of the victories

The fall of [Carthage](https://www.britannica.com/place/Carthage-ancient-city-Tunisia) and [Corinth](https://www.britannica.com/place/Corinth-Greece) did not even mark a temporary end to warfare. War and military glory were an essential part of the Roman aristocratic [ethos](https://www.britannica.com/art/ethos) and, hence, of Roman political life. Apart from major wars still to come, small wars on the frontiers of Roman power—never precisely fixed—continued to provide an essential motive in Roman history: in Spain, Sardinia, Illyria, and [Macedonia](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Macedonia), barbarians could be defeated and triumphs won. Thus the limits of Roman power were gradually extended and the territories within them pacified, while men of noble stock rivaled the virtus of their ancestors and new men staked their own competing claims, winning glory essential to political advancement and sharing the booty with their officers and soldiers. Cicero could still depict it as a major disgrace for Lucius Piso (consul; 58 BC) that he had won no triumph in the traditionally “triumphal” [province](https://www.britannica.com/topic/province-ancient-Roman-government) of Macedonia. Nonetheless, the coincidence of the capture of Corinth and Carthage was even in antiquity regarded as a turning point in Roman history: it was the end (for the time being) of warfare against civilized powers, in which the danger was felt to be greater and the glory and the booty were superior to those won against [barbarian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/barbarian) tribes.

## Changes in provincial administration

The first immediate effect was on the administration of the [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science). The military basis of provincial administration remained: the governor (as he is called) was in Roman eyes a commander with absolute and unappealable powers over all except Roman citizens, within the limits of the territory (his provincia) assigned to him (normally) by the [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history). He was always prepared—and in some provinces expected—to fight and win. But it had been found that those unlimited powers were often abused and that Senate control could not easily be asserted at increasing distances from Rome. For political and perhaps for [moral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moral) reasons, excessive abuse without hope of a remedy could not be permitted. Hence, when the decision to annex Carthage and Macedonia had been made in principle (149 BC), a permanent court (the quaestio repetundarum) was established at [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome) to hear complaints against former commanders and, where necessary, to assure repayment of illegal exactions. No penalty for offenders was provided, and there was no derogation from the commander’s powers during his tenure; nevertheless, the step was a landmark in the recognition of imperial responsibility, and it was also to have important effects on Roman politics.

Another result of the new conquests was a major administrative departure. When [Africa](https://www.britannica.com/place/Africa) and Macedonia became provinciae to be regularly assigned to commanders, it was decided to break with precedent by not increasing the number of senior magistrates (praetors). Instead, prorogation—the device of leaving a magistrate in office pro magistratu (“in place of a magistrate”) after his term had expired, which had hitherto been freely used when emergencies had led to shortages of regular commanders—was established as part of the administrative system: thenceforth, every year at least two praetors would have to be retained as promagistrates. This was the beginning of the dissociation between urban magistracy and foreign command that was to become a cardinal principle of the system of [Sulla](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sulla) and of the developed Roman Empire.

## Social and economic ills

It is not clear to what extent the temporary end of the age of major wars helped to produce the crisis of the [Roman Republic](https://www.britannica.com/place/Roman-Republic-historical-territory-Italy-1798-1799). The general view of thinking Romans was that the relaxation of external pressures led to internal disintegration. (This has happened in other states, and the view is not to be lightly dismissed.) Moreover, the end of large-scale booty led to economic recession in Rome, thus intensifying poverty and discontent. But the underlying crisis had been building up over a long period.

# The reform movement of the Gracchi (133–121 BC)

From the state’s point of view, the chief effect was a decline in military manpower. The minimum property qualification for service was lowered and the minimum age (17) ignored; resistance became frequent, especially to the distant and unending guerrilla war in Spain.

## The program and career of [Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tiberius-Sempronius-Gracchus)

[Tiberius Gracchus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tiberius-Sempronius-Gracchus), grandson of [Scipio Africanus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Scipio-Africanus) and son of the Gracchus who had conquered the Celtiberi and treated them well, was [quaestor](https://www.britannica.com/topic/quaestor-ancient-Roman-official) in Mancinus’ army when it faced annihilation; on the strength of his [family name](https://www.britannica.com/topic/surname), he personally negotiated the peace that saved it. When the Senate—on the motion of his cousin [Scipio Aemilianus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Scipio-Africanus-the-Younger), who later finished the war—renounced the peace, Tiberius felt aggrieved; he joined a group of senior senators hostile to Aemilianus and with ideas on reform. Elected [tribune](https://www.britannica.com/topic/tribune-Roman-official) for 133, in Scipio’s absence, Tiberius attempted to find a solution for the social and military crisis, with the political credit to go to himself and his backers. Tiberius had no intention of touching private property; his idea was to enforce the legal but widely ignored limit of 500 iugera (309 acres) on occupation of public land and to use the land thus retrieved for settling landless citizens, who would both regain a secure living and be liable for service. The slave war in [Sicily](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sicily), which had lasted several years and had threatened to spread to [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy), had underlined both the danger of using large numbers of slaves on the land and the need for a major increase in military citizen manpower.

Tiberius’ proposal was bound to meet with opposition in the [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history), which consisted of large landowners. On the advice of his eminent backers, he took his bill—which made various [concessions](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/concessions) to those asked to obey the law and hand back excess public land—straight to the Assembly of the [Plebs](https://www.britannica.com/topic/plebeian), where it found wide support. This procedure was not revolutionary; bills directly concerning the people appear to have been frequently passed in this way. But his opponents persuaded another aristocratic tribune, [Marcus Octavius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Octavius), to veto the bill. Tiberius tried the [constitutional](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constitutional) riposte: an appeal to the Senate for arbitration. But the Senate was unwilling to help, and Octavius was unwilling to negotiate over his veto—an action apparently unprecedented, though not (strictly speaking) unconstitutional. Tiberius had to improvise a way out of the impasse. He met Octavius’ action with a similarly unprecedented retort and had Octavius deposed by the Assembly. He then passed his bill in a less conciliatory form and had himself, his father-in-law, and his brother appointed commissioners with powers to determine boundaries of public land, confiscate excess acreage, and divide it in inalienable allotments among landless citizens. As it happened, envoys from Pergamum had arrived to inform the Senate that Attalus III had died and made the Roman people his heirs (provided the cities of his kingdom were left free). Tiberius, at whose house the envoys were lodging, anticipated Senate debate and had the inheritance accepted by the people and the money used to finance his agrarian schemes.

Tiberius’ opponents now charged him with aiming at [tyranny](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tyranny), a charge that many may well have believed: redistribution of land was connected with demagogic tyranny in Hellenistic states, and Tiberius’ subsequent actions had been high-handed and beyond the flexible borderline of what was regarded as mos majorum (constitutional custom). Fearing prosecution once his term in office was over, he now began to canvass for a second tribunate—another unprecedented act, bound to reinforce fears of tyranny. The elections took place in an atmosphere of violence, with nearly all his tribunician colleagues now opposed to him. When the [consul](https://www.britannica.com/topic/consul-ancient-Roman-official) [Publius Scaevola](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Publius-Mucius-Scaevola), on strict legal grounds, refused to act against him, [Publius Scipio Nasica](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Publius-Cornelius-Scipio-Nasica-Serapio), the chief pontiff, led a number of senators and their clients to the Assembly, and Tiberius was killed in a resulting scuffle. Widespread and bloody repression followed in 132. Thus political murder and political martyrdom were introduced into Roman politics.

The land commission, however, was allowed to continue because it could not easily be stopped. Some evidence of its activities survives. By 129, perhaps running out of available land held by citizens, it began to apply the Gracchan law to public land held by Italian individuals or [communities](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/communities). This had probably not been [envisaged](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/envisaged) by Tiberius, just as he did not include noncitizens among the beneficiaries of distributions. The Senate, on the motion of Scipio Aemilianus, upheld the Italians’ protests, transferring decisions concerning Italian-held land from the commission to a consul. This seriously hampered the commission’s activities. Marcus Fulvius Flaccus, chairman of the commission and consul in 125, tried to solve the problem by offering the Italians the citizenship (or alternatively the right to appeal against Roman executive acts to the Roman people) in return for bringing their holdings of public land under the Gracchan law. This aroused fears of uncontrollable political [repercussions](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/repercussions). Flaccus was ordered by the Senate to fight a war in southern [France](https://www.britannica.com/place/France) (where he gained a triumph) and had to abandon his proposal. There is no sign of widespread Italian interest in it at this time, though the revolt of the Latin colony Fregellae (destroyed 125) may be connected with its failure.

## The program and career of [Gaius Sempronius Gracchus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaius-Sempronius-Gracchus)

In 123 Gaius Gracchus, a younger brother of Tiberius, became tribune. He had served on Tiberius’ land commission and had supported Flaccus’ plan. Making the most of his [martyred](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/martyred) brother’s name, Gaius embarked on a scheme of general reform in which, for the first time in [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome), Greek theoretical influences may be traced. Among many reforms—including provision for a stable and cheap wheat price and for the foundation of colonies (one on the site of Carthage), to which Italians were admitted—two major ideas stand out: to increase public revenues (both from the [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science) and from [taxes](https://www.britannica.com/topic/taxation)) and pass the benefit on to the people; and to raise the wealthiest nonsenators (particularly the [equites](https://www.britannica.com/topic/eques), holders of the “public horse”—who received state financial aid for the purchase and upkeep of their horses—and next to senators in social standing) to a position from which, without actually taking part in the process of government, they could watch over senatorial administration and make it more responsible. The idea was evoked by Tiberius’ death. As early as 129 a law compelled senators to surrender the “public horse” (which hitherto they had also held) and possibly in other ways [enhanced](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enhanced) the group [consciousness](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/consciousness) and privileges of the equites. Regarding the increase of public revenue, Gaius put the publicani (public contractors, hitherto chiefly concerned with army and building contracts and with farming minor taxes) in charge of the main tax of Asia—a rich [province](https://www.britannica.com/topic/province-ancient-Roman-government) formed out of Attalus’ inheritance, which would henceforth provide Rome with the major part of its income. This was expected both to reduce senatorial corruption and to improve [efficiency](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/efficiency). Gaius also put eminent nonsenators (probably defined by wealth, but perhaps limited to the equites, or equestrian class) in charge of the quaestio repetundarum, whose senatorial members had shown too much leniency to their colleagues, and he imposed severe penalties on senators convicted by that court. Finally, in a second tribunate, he hoped to give citizenship to Latins and [Latin rights](https://www.britannica.com/topic/jus-Latii) to other Italians, with the help of Flaccus who, though a distinguished former consul, took the unique step of becoming tribune. But a consul and a tribune of 122 together persuaded the citizen voters that it was against their interests to share the privileges of citizenship: the bill was defeated, and Gaius failed in his attempt to be re-elected once more. In 121, preparing (as private citizens) to use force to oppose the cancellation of some of their laws, Gaius and Flaccus were killed in a riot, and many of their followers were executed.

During the next decade the measures benefiting the people were largely abolished, though the Gracchan land distributions, converted into private property, did temporarily strengthen the Roman citizen peasantry. The provisions giving power to wealthy nonsenators could not be touched, for political reasons, and they survived as the chief effect of Gaius’ tribunates. The court seems to have worked better than before, and, during the next generation, several other standing criminal courts were instituted, as were occasional ad hoc tribunals, always with the same class of jurors. In 106 a law adding senators to the juries was passed, but it remained in force for only a short time.

# The republic (c. 121–91 BC)

## War against Jugurtha

Since Roman historians were no more interested in internal factional politics than (on the whole) in social or economic developments, the struggles of the aristocratic families must be pieced together from chance information. It would be mere [paradox](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paradox) to deny the importance in republican [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome), as in better known aristocratic republics, of [family](https://www.britannica.com/topic/family-kinship) feuds, alliances, and policies, and parts of the picture are known—e.g., the central importance of the family of the Metelli, prominent in politics for a generation after the Gracchi and dominant for part of that time. In foreign affairs the client kingdom of [Numidia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Numidia)—loyal ever since its institution by Scipio Africanus—assumed quite unwarranted importance when a succession crisis developed there soon after 120.

After the death of its first ruler, [Masinissa](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Masinissa) (148), Numidia was divided into three parts, each to be ruled by one of Masinissa’s sons. However, two of them soon died, and power fell to the eldest, Micipsa, who himself had two sons. Micipsa also adopted [Jugurtha](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jugurtha), the natural son of his brother Mastanabal. Following Micipsa’s death in 118, Jugurtha sought to oust his two cousins from their shares of the divided Numidia, relying on his superior ability and aristocratic Roman connections. Rome’s usual diplomatic methods failed to stop Jugurtha from disposing of his cousins, but the massacre of Italian settlers at Cirta by his soldiers forced the [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history) to declare war (112). The war was waged reluctantly and ineffectively, with the result that charges of bribery were freely bandied about by demagogic tribunes taking advantage of suspicion of aristocratic political behaviour that had smoldered ever since the Gracchan crisis. Significantly, some eminent men, hated from those days, were now convicted of corruption. The Metelli, however, emerged unscathed, and Quintus Metellus, [consul](https://www.britannica.com/topic/consul-ancient-Roman-official) in 109, was entrusted with the war in Africa. He waged it with obvious competence but failed to finish it and thus gave [Gaius Marius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaius-Marius), a senior officer, his chance.

## The career of Gaius Marius

Marius, born of an equestrian family at Arpinum, had attracted the attention of [Scipio Aemilianus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Scipio-Africanus-the-Younger) as a young soldier and, by shrewd political opportunism, had risen to the praetorship and married into the [patrician](https://www.britannica.com/topic/patrician) family of the Julii Caesares. Though Marius had deeply offended the Metelli, once his patrons, his considerable military talents had induced [Quintus Metellus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Quintus-Caecilius-Metellus-Numidicus) to take him to Africa as a legatus. Marius intrigued against his commander in [order](https://www.britannica.com/technology/order-architecture) to gain a consulship; he was elected (chiefly with the help of the [equites](https://www.britannica.com/topic/eques) and antiaristocratic tribunes) for 107 and was given charge of the war by special vote of the people. He did little better than Metellus had, but in 105 his [quaestor](https://www.britannica.com/topic/quaestor-ancient-Roman-official) Lucius [Sulla](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sulla), in delicate and dangerous negotiations, brought about the capture of Jugurtha, opportunely winning the war for Marius and Rome.

During the preceding decade a serious threat to Italy had developed in the north. Starting in 125, several Roman commanders (Marcus Flaccus has been noted) had fought against Ligurian and Gallic tribes in southern [France](https://www.britannica.com/place/France) and had finally established a Roman sphere of influence there: a road had been built linking [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy) with [Spain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Spain), and some garrison posts probably secured it; finally, a colony was settled at Narbonne, an important road junction (c. 118). But, unwilling to extend administrative responsibilities, the Senate had refused to establish a regular provincia. Then some migrating German tribes, chief of them the [Cimbri](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Cimbri), after defeating a Roman consul, invaded southern France, attracting native sympathy and finding little effective Roman opposition. Two more consular armies suffered defeat, and in October 105 a consul and proconsul with their forces were destroyed at Orange. There was panic in Rome, allayed only by the firm action of the other consul, Publius Rutilius Rufus.

At this moment news of Marius’ success in [Africa](https://www.britannica.com/place/Africa) arrived, and he was at once dispensed from legal restrictions and again elected consul for 104. After a brilliant triumph that restored Roman morale, he took over the army prepared and trained by Rutilius. He was reelected consul year after year, while the German tribes delayed attacking Italy. Finally, in 102–101, he [annihilated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/annihilated) them at Aquae Sextiae (Aix-les-Bains) and, with his colleague, [Quintus Catulus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Quintus-Lutatius-Catulus-Roman-general-died-86-BC), on the Campi Raudii (near the Po delta). Another triumph and a sixth consulship (in 101) were his reward.

In his first consulship, Marius had taken a step of great (and probably unrecognized) importance: aware of the difficulties long [endemic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/endemic) in the traditional system of recruitment, he had ignored property qualifications in enrolling his army and, as a result, had recruited ample volunteers among men who had nothing to lose. This radical solution was thenceforth generally imitated, and conscription became confined to emergencies (such as the Social and Civil wars). He also [enhanced](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enhanced) the importance of the legionary eagle (the standard), thus beginning the process that led to each [legion’s](https://www.britannica.com/topic/legion) having a continuing corporate identity. At the same time, Rutilius introduced arms drill and reformed the selection of senior officers. Various tactical reforms in due course led to the increasing prominence of the cohort (one-tenth of a legion) as a tactical unit and the total reliance on non-Roman [auxiliaries](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/auxiliaries) for light-armed and cavalry service. The precise development of these reforms cannot be traced, but they culminated in the much more effective armies of Pompey and Caesar.

Marius’ African army had been unwilling to engage in another war, and Marius preferred to use newly levied soldiers (no longer difficult to find). But neither he nor the Senate seemed aware of any responsibilities to the veterans. In 103 a [tribune](https://www.britannica.com/topic/tribune-Roman-official), [Lucius Saturninus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucius-Appuleius-Saturninus), offered to pass a law providing land in Africa for them in return for Marius’ support for some anti-oligarchic activities of his own. Marius agreed, and the large lots distributed to his veterans (both Roman and Italian) turned out to be the beginning of the Romanization of Africa. In 100, with the German wars ended, Saturninus again proved a welcome ally, arranging for the settlement of Marius’ veterans in [Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe). An incidental effect was the departure of Marius’ old commander and subsequent enemy, Quintus Metellus, who refused to recognize the validity of Saturninus’ law and, choosing martyrdom, went into exile. But this time Saturninus exacted a high price. With his ally, the [praetor](https://www.britannica.com/topic/praetor) [Gaius Glaucia](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaius-Servilius-Glaucia), he introduced laws to gain the favour of [plebs](https://www.britannica.com/topic/plebeian) and equites and proceeded to provide for the settlement of veterans of wars in Macedonia and [Sicily](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sicily) in the same way as for those of Marius’ war. He planned to seek reelection for 99, with Glaucia illegally gaining the consulship. Violence and even murder were freely used to accomplish these aims.

Marius now had to make a choice. Saturninus and Glaucia might secure him the continuing favour of the plebs and perhaps the equites, though they might also steal it for themselves. But as the saviour of his country and six times consul, he now hoped to become an elder statesman (princeps), accepted and honoured by those who had once looked down on him as an upstart. To this end he had long laboured, dealing out favours to aristocrats who might make useful allies. This was the reward Marius desired for his achievement; he never thought of revolution or [tyranny](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tyranny). Hence, when called on to save the state from his revolutionary allies, he could not refuse. He imprisoned them and their armed adherents and did not prevent their being lynched. Yet, having saved the [oligarchy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/oligarchy) from revolution, he received little reward; he lost the favour of the plebs, while the [oligarchs](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/oligarchs), in view of both his birth and his earlier unscrupulous ambition, refused to accept him as their equal. Metellus was recalled; this was a bitter blow to Marius’ [prestige](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prestige), and he preferred to leave Rome and visit [Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Asia-ancient-Roman-province).

Before long a face-saving compromise was found, and Marius returned; but in the 90s he played no major part. Though he held his own when his friends and clients were attacked in the courts, his old aristocratic protégés now found more promising allies. Sulla is typical: closely associated with Marius in his early career, he was by 91 ready to take the lead in attacking Marius and (significantly) found eager support. The [oligarchy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/oligarchy) could not forgive Marius.

Wars and dictatorship (c. 91–80 BC)

## Events in [Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Asia-ancient-Roman-province)

In foreign affairs the 90s were dominated by Asia, [Rome’s](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome) chief source of income. [Mithradates VI](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mithradates-VI-Eupator), king of [Pontus](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pontus-ancient-district-Turkey), had built a large [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science) around the [Black Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Black-Sea) and was probing and intriguing in the Roman sphere of influence. Marius had met him and had given him a firm warning, temporarily effective: Mithradates had proper respect for Roman power. Scheming to annex [Cappadocia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cappadocia), he had been thwarted by the [Senate’s](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history) instructing Sulla, as proconsul, to install a pro-Roman king there in 96–95. (It was on this occasion that Sulla received a Parthian embassy—the first contact between the two powers.) But dissatisfaction in the Roman [province](https://www.britannica.com/topic/province-ancient-Roman-government) of Asia gave new hope to Mithradates. Ineffectively organized after [annexation](https://www.britannica.com/topic/annexation) and corrupt in its cities’ internal administration, it was soon overrun with Italian businessmen and Roman tax collectors. When the Senate realized the danger, it sent its most distinguished jurist, [Quintus Mucius Scaevola](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Quintus-Mucius-Scaevola-Roman-jurist) (consul in 95 and pontifex maximus), on an unprecedented mission to reorganize Asia (94). He took Publius Rutilius Rufus—jurist, [stoic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stoic) philosopher, and former consul—with him as his senior officer, and after Scaevola’s return Rutilius remained behind, firmly applying the new principles they had established. This caused an outcry from businessmen, whose profits Scaevola had kept within bounds; he was prosecuted for “extortion” in 92 and convicted after a trial in which Roman publicani and businessmen unscrupulously used their power among the class that provided criminal juries. The verdict revealed the breakdown of [Gaius Gracchus’](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaius-Sempronius-Gracchus) system: the class he had raised to watch over the Senate now held irresponsible power, making orderly administration impossible and endangering the empire. Various leading senators were at once vexatiously prosecuted, and political [chaos](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/chaos) threatened.

## Developments in [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Italy)

The 90s also saw dangerous developments in Italy. In the 2nd century BC, Italians as a whole had shown little desire for Roman citizenship and had been remarkably submissive under exploitation and ill-treatment. The most active of their governing class flourished in overseas business, and the more traditionally minded were content to have their oligarchic rule supported by Rome. Their admission to citizenship had been proposed as a by-product of the Gracchan reforms. By 122 it had become clear that the Roman people agreed with the [oligarchy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/oligarchy) in rejecting it. The sacrifices demanded of Italy in the Numidian and German wars probably increased dissatisfaction among Italians with their patently inferior status. Marius gave citizenship to some as a reward for military distinction—illegally, but his standing (auctoritas) [sufficed](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sufficed) to defend his actions. Saturninus admitted Italians to veteran settlements and tried to gain citizenship for some by full admission to Roman colonies. The [censors](https://www.britannica.com/topic/censor-ancient-Roman-official) of 97–96, aristocrats connected with Marius, shared his ideas and freely placed eminent Italians on the citizen registers. This might have allayed dissatisfaction, but the consuls of 95 passed a law purging the rolls and providing penalties for those guilty of fraudulent arrogation. The result was insecurity and danger for many leading Italians. By 92 there was talk of violence and [conspiracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conspiracy) among desperate men.

It was in these circumstances that the eminent young noble, [Marcus Livius Drusus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Livius-Drusus-Roman-politician-died-109-BC), became [tribune](https://www.britannica.com/topic/tribune-Roman-official) for 91 and hoped to solve the menacing accumulation of problems by means of a major scheme of reforms. He attracted the support of the poor by agrarian and colonial legislation and tried to have all Italians admitted to citizenship and to solve the jury problem by a compromise: the courts would be transferred to the Senate, and 300 [equites](https://www.britannica.com/topic/eques) would be admitted to it. (To cope with the increase in business it would need this expansion in size.) Some leading senators, frightened at the dangerous situation that had developed, gave weighty support. Had Drusus succeeded, the poor and the Italians might have been satisfied; the equites, deprived of their most ambitious element by promotion, might have acquiesced; and the Senate, always governed by the [prestige](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prestige) of the noble principes rather than by votes and divisions, could have returned, little changed by the infusion of new blood, to its leading position in the process of government. But Drusus failed. Some members of each class affected were more conscious of the loss than of the gain; and an active [consul](https://www.britannica.com/topic/consul-ancient-Roman-official), Lucius Philippus, provided leadership for their [disparate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disparate) opposition. After much violence, Drusus’ laws were declared invalid. Finally he himself was assassinated. The Italians now rose in revolt (the Social War), and in Rome a special tribunal, manned by the Gracchan jury class, convicted many of Drusus’ supporters until the Senate succeeded in suspending its sittings because of the military danger.

The first year of the [Social War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Social-War-Roman-history) (90) was dangerous: the tribes of central and southern Italy, traditionally among the best soldiers in Rome’s wars, organized in a confederacy for the struggle that had been forced upon them. Fortunately all but one of the Latin cities—related to Rome by blood and tradition and specially favoured by Roman law—remained loyal: their governing class had for some time had the privilege of automatically acquiring Roman citizenship by holding local office. Moreover, Rome now showed its old ability to act quickly and wisely in emergencies: the consul [Lucius Caesar](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucius-Julius-Caesar) passed a law giving citizenship to all Italians who wanted it. The measure came in time to head off major revolts in Umbria and Etruria, which accepted at once.

## Civil war and the rule of Lucius Sulla

In 89 the war in central Italy was won, and [Gnaeus Pompeius Strabo](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gnaeus-Pompeius-Strabo) celebrated a triumph. Attention now turned to the East, where Mithradates had taken advantage of Rome’s troubles to expel the kings of Cappadocia and [Bithynia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bithynia). A Roman embassy restored them, and he withdrew. However, when the envoys incited Bithynian incursions into his territory, Mithradates launched a major offensive; he overran the two kingdoms and invaded Roman territory, where he attracted the sympathy of the natives by executing thousands of Italians and defeating and capturing the Roman commanders in the area.

In Rome, various men, including Marius, had hoped for the Eastern command. But it went to [Sulla](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sulla), elected consul for 88 after distinguished service in the Social War. [Publius Sulpicius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Publius-Sulpicius-Rufus), a tribune in that year and an old friend of Drusus, tried to continue the latter’s policy of [justice](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/justice) to the Italians by abolishing the gerrymandering that in practice deprived the new citizens of an effective vote. Finding the [oligarchy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/oligarchy) firmly opposed, he gained the support of Marius (who still commanded much loyalty) for his plans by having the Eastern command transferred to him. After much street-fighting, the consuls escaped from Rome, and Sulpicius’ bills were passed. Sulla’s response was totally unforeseen: he appealed to the army he had led in the Social War, which was still engaged in mopping-up operations in Campania, and persuaded them to march on Rome. He occupied the city and executed Sulpicius; Marius and others escaped. Significantly, Sulla’s officers left him. It was the first time a private army of citizens had occupied Rome—an effect of Marius’ army reform, which had ended by creating a “client army” loyal chiefly to its commander, and of the Social War, which had made the use of force within Italy seem commonplace. The end of the republic was foreshadowed.

Having cowed Rome into acquiescence and having passed some legislation, Sulla left for the East. [Cinna](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucius-Cornelius-Cinna), one of the consuls of 87, at once called for the overthrow of Sulla’s measures. Resisted by his colleague Octavius, he left Rome to collect an army and, with the help of Marius, occupied the city after a siege. Several leading men were killed or condemned to death, Sulla and his supporters were outlawed, and (after Marius’ death early in 86) another commander was sent to Asia. The policy now changed to one of reconciliation: the Social War was wound up, and the government gained wide acceptance until Cinna was killed by mutinous soldiers (84).

Sulla meanwhile easily defeated Mithradates’ forces in two battles in Boeotia, took Athens, which under a revolutionary regime had declared for Mithradates, and cleared the king’s army out of Greece. While negotiating with Cinna’s government, Sulla also entered upon negotiations with Mithradates and, when he heard of Cinna’s death, quickly made peace and an alliance with Mithradates, driving the government’s commander in Asia to suicide. After wintering his troops in the rich cities of Asia, Sulla crossed into Greece and then into Italy, where his veteran army broke all resistance and occupied Rome (82). Sulla was elected [dictator](https://www.britannica.com/topic/dictator-Roman-official) and, while Italy and all the provinces except Spain were quickly reduced, began a reign of terror (the “proscriptions”), in which hundreds of his enemies or those of his adherents were killed without trial, while their property went to enrich him and his friends. Wherever in Italy he had met resistance, land was expropriated and given to his soldiers for settlement.

While the terror prevailed, Sulla used his powers to put through a [comprehensive](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comprehensive) program of reform (81). Although he had twice taken Rome with a private proletarian army, he had earlier had connections with the inner circles of the oligarchy, and after Cinna’s death some eminent men who had refused to [collaborate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/collaborate) with Cinna joined Sulla. By the time Sulla’s success seemed certain, even most of those who had [collaborated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/collaborated) were on his side, and he was acclaimed as the defender of the nobility who had defeated an illegal revolutionary regime. His reforms aimed chiefly at stabilizing Senate authority by removing [alternative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alternative) centres of power. The tribunate was emasculated; the censors’ powers were reduced; provincial governors were subjected to stricter Senate control; and the equites, who had been purged of Sulla’s opponents by the proscriptions, were deprived of some symbols of dignity and made leaderless by the inclusion of 300 of Sulla’s chief supporters in the Senate. The jury reform of Gaius Gracchus, seen by some leading senators as the prime cause of political disintegration, could now be undone, and the criminal courts could once more become a monopoly of senators.

Sulla’s measures were by no means merely reactionary. His program was basically that of Marcus Drusus. His overriding aim was the restoration of stable government, and this could only come from the Senate, directed by the principes (former consuls and those they chose to consult). Sulla accepted and even extended recent developments where they seemed useful: the Italians retained full citizenship; the system of standing criminal courts was expanded; the practice of praetors normally spending their year of office in Rome and then going to provinces for a second year was extended to consuls and became an [integral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/integral) part of his system. To prevent long command of armies (which might lead to careers like his own), Sulla increased the number of praetors so that, in principle and in normal circumstances, each province might have a new governor every year. As for the overriding problem of poverty, his contribution to solving it was to settle tens of thousands of his veterans on land confiscated from enemies in Italy; having become landowners, the veterans would be ready to defend the social [order](https://www.britannica.com/technology/order-architecture), in which they now had a stake, against the dispossessed.

At the beginning of 80 Sulla laid down his dictatorship and became merely consul, with the senior Metellus (Quintus Metellus Pius), a relative of his wife, as his colleague. The state of emergency was officially ended. At the end of the year, after seeing to the election of two reliable consuls, Sulla retired to Campania as a private citizen; he hoped that the restored oligarchy would learn to govern the state he had handed over to them. For 78 [Marcus Lepidus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Aemilius-Lepidus-Roman-senator-died-circa-77-BC), an ambitious [patrician](https://www.britannica.com/topic/patrician) whom Sulla disliked and distrusted, was elected consul. Sulla did not intervene. Within a few months, Sulla was dead. Lepidus at once attacked his system, using the grievances of the expropriated as a rallying cry and his province of [Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe) as a base. But he was easily defeated by his former colleague [Quintus Catulus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Quintus-Lutatius-Catulus-Roman-politician-died-61-60-BC), assisted by young Gnaeus Pompeius (Pompey).

## The Roman state in the two decades after Sulla (79–60 BC)

## The early career of [Pompey](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pompey-the-Great)

Pompey was the son of Gnaeus Pompeius Strabo, who had triumphed after the Social War but had incurred general hatred because of cold-blooded [duplicity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/duplicity) during the troubles of 88 and 87. After Strabo’s death, young Pompey, who had served under him and inherited his dubiously won wealth, was protected by Cinna’s government against his father’s enemies. Following in his father’s footsteps, he deserted the government after Cinna’s death, raised a force among his father’s veterans in central Italy, and helped to conquer Italy and, in a lightning campaign, [Sicily](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sicily) and the province of Africa for Sulla. Though not old enough to hold any regular magistracy (he was born in 106), he had, from these military bases, blackmailed Sulla into granting him a triumph (81) and had married into the core of the Sullan oligarchy. Out of [pique](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pique) against Sulla, he had supported Lepidus’ election for 78, but he had too great a stake in the Sullan system to permit Lepidus to overthrow it.

Meanwhile a more serious challenge to the system had arisen in Iberia. [Quintus Sertorius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Quintus-Sertorius), a former [praetor](https://www.britannica.com/topic/praetor) of tough Sabine gentry stock, had refused to follow most of his social betters in joining Sulla; instead he had left for Spain, where he claimed to represent the [legitimate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/legitimate) government. Although acting throughout as a Roman proconsul, with a “counter-Senate” of eminent Roman citizens, Sertorius won the enthusiastic support of the native population by his fairness, honesty, and [charisma](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/charisma), and he soon held most of the [Iberian Peninsula](https://www.britannica.com/place/Iberian-Peninsula), defending it successfully even against a large force under Quintus [Metellus Pius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Quintus-Caecilius-Metellus-Pius). When the consuls of 77 would have nothing to do with this war, Pompey was entrusted by the Senate, through the efforts of his eminent friends and sponsors, with the task of assisting Metellus. The war dragged on for years, with little glory for the Roman commanders. Although Sertorius had many sympathizers in Italy, superior numbers and resources finally wore him down, and he was assassinated by a Roman officer. Pompey easily defeated the remnants of Sertorius’ forces in 72.

The death of [Nicomedes IV](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nicomedes-IV) of Bithynia (74) led to another major war. Like Attalus of Pergamum, Nicomedes left his kingdom to Rome, and this provoked Mithradates, who was in contact with Sertorius and knew of Rome’s difficulties, to challenge Rome again. The Eastern command again led to intrigues in Rome. The command finally went to Lucius [Lucullus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucius-Licinius-Lucullus), a relative of Sulla and consul in 74, who hoped to build up a countervailing power in the East.

At the same time, Marcus Antonius, father of the later Triumvir, was given a command against the pirates in the eastern Mediterranean (whom his father had already fought in 102–100), partly, perhaps, as further reinsurance against Pompey. With Italian manpower heavily committed, a minor slave rising led by [Spartacus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Spartacus-Roman-gladiator) (73) assumed threatening dimensions, until Marcus Crassus (an old Sullan and profiteer in the proscriptions) volunteered to accept a special command and defeated the slaves. At this point (71) Pompey returned from Spain with his army, crucified the remnants of the slave army, and claimed credit for the victory.

# Pompey and Crassus

He and Crassus now confronted each other, each demanding the consulship for 70, though Pompey had held no regular magistracy and was not a senator. Agreeing to join forces, both secured it.

During their consulship, the political, though not the administrative, part of the Sullan settlement was repealed. The tribunes’ powers were fully restored; criminal juries were divided between senators and wealthy nonsenators; and, for the first time since [Sulla](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sulla), two censors—both supporters of Pompey—were elected, who purged the [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history) and, in compiling the registers, at last fully [implemented](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/implemented) the Italians’ citizenship. The year 70 also saw the prosecution of [Verres](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaius-Verres) (son of a “new man” and Sullan profiteer), who had surpassed the liberal Roman conventions in exploiting his [province](https://www.britannica.com/topic/province-ancient-Roman-government) of [Sicily](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sicily). For future [impunity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/impunity) he relied on his aristocratic connections (especially the Metelli and their friends), his fortune, and the known corruptibility of the Sullan senatorial juries. But Verres was unlucky. First, he had ill-treated some of Pompey’s important Sicilian clients, thus incurring Pompey’s displeasure; next, his case coincided with the anti-Sullan reaction of 70; finally, the Sicilians succeeded in persuading [Cicero](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Cicero)—an ambitious young “new man” from Arpinum hoping to imitate the success of his fellow citizen Marius by means of his [rhetorical](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rhetorical) ability—to undertake the prosecution. Despite obstruction from Verres’ friends, Cicero collected massive evidence against him, presented his case to fit into the political [context](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/context) of the year, and obtained Verres’ [conviction](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conviction) as an act of expiation for the shortcomings of the Sullan [order](https://www.britannica.com/technology/order-architecture).

The year 70 thus marked the loss of control by the Sullan establishment. The nobility (families descended from consuls) continued to gain most of the consulships, with the old patriciate (revived by Sulla after a long decline) stronger than for generations; the Senate still supervised administration and made ordinary political decisions; the system continued to rely essentially on mos majorum (constitutional custom) and auctoritas (prestige)—potent forces in the status society of the [Roman Republic](https://www.britannica.com/place/Roman-Republic). The solid bases of law and power that Sulla had tried to give it had been surrendered, however. The demagogue—tribune or consul—could use the legal machinery of the popular assembly (hence such men are called populares), while the commander could rely on his army in the pursuit of private ambition. The situation that Sulla had tried to remedy now recurred, made worse by his intervention. His massacres and proscriptions had weeded out the defenders of lawful government, and his rewards had gone to the timeservers and the unscrupulous. The large infusion of [equites](https://www.britannica.com/topic/eques) into the Senate had intensified the effect. While eliminating the serious friction between the two classes, which had made the state ungovernable by 91, it had filled the Senate with men whose tradition was the opposite of that sense of mission and public service that had animated the best of the [aristocracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aristocracy). Few men in the new ruling class saw beyond self-interest and self-indulgence.

One result was that massive bribery and civil disorder in the service of ambition became [endemic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/endemic). Laws were repeatedly passed to stop them, but they remained ineffective because few found it in their interest to enforce them. Exploitation of the provinces did not decrease after Verres: governors (still with unlimited powers) feathered their own nests and were expected to provide for all their friends. Extortion cases became a political ritual, with [convictions](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/convictions) impossible to obtain. Cicero, thenceforth usually [counsel](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/counsel) for the defense, presented hair-raising behaviour as commonplace and claimed it as acceptable. The Senate’s traditional opposition to [annexation](https://www.britannica.com/topic/annexation) faded out. Pompey made [Syria](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Syria) into a province and added a large part of [Pontus](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pontus-ancient-district-Turkey) to [Bithynia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bithynia) (inherited in 74 and occupied in 70); the [demagogue](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/demagogue) [Clodius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Publius-Clodius-Pulcher) annexed [Cyprus](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Cyprus)—driving its king to suicide—to pay for his massive grain distributions in Rome; [Caesar](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julius-Caesar-Roman-ruler), finally, conquered [Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe) by open aggression and genocide and bled it white for the benefit of his friends and his ambitions. Crassus would have done the same with Parthia, had he succeeded. Opposition to all this in the Senate, where it appeared, was based on personal or political antagonism. If the robber barons were attacked on [moral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moral) grounds, it was because of the use they made of their power in [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome).

Politically, the 60s lay under the shadow of Pompey. Refusing to take an ordinary province in 69, he waited for his chance. It came in 67 when his adherent [Gabinius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aulus-Gabinius), as [tribune](https://www.britannica.com/topic/tribune-Roman-official), secured him, against the opposition of all important men, an extraordinary command with unprecedented powers to deal with the pirates. Pompey succeeded within a few months where Antonius and others had failed. The equites and the people were delighted because trade, including Rome’s food imports, would now be secure. Meanwhile Lucullus had driven Mithradates out of Anatolia and into Armenia; but he had offended Roman businessmen by strict control and his own soldiers and officers by strict [discipline](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discipline). Faced with mutinies, he suffered a reverse and became [vulnerable](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vulnerable) to attacks in Rome. In 66 another tribunician law appointed Pompey, fresh from his naval victories, to take over supreme command in the East, which he did at once, studiously insulting his predecessor. He quickly defeated Mithradates and procured his death, then spent some time in a total reorganization of the East, where [Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Asia-ancient-Roman-province) (the chief source of revenue) was protected by three further provinces and a ring of client states beyond the frontier. The whole of the East now stood in his clientela (clientship), and most of it owed him money as well. He returned by far the wealthiest man in Rome.

## Political suspicion and violence

Meanwhile Roman politics had been full of suspicion and violence, much of it stirred up by Crassus who, remembering 71, feared Pompey’s return and tried to make his own power impregnable. There was much material for revolution, with poverty (especially in the country, among families dispossessed by Sulla) and debt (among both the poor and the dissolute rich) providing suitable issues for unscrupulous populares. One such man, the [patrician](https://www.britannica.com/topic/patrician) [Catiline](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Catiline-Roman-politician), after twice failing to gain the consulship by traditional bribery and intrigue, put himself at the head of a movement planning a [coup d’état](https://www.britannica.com/topic/coup-detat) in Rome to coincide with an armed rising in [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy) (late 63). Cicero, as [consul](https://www.britannica.com/topic/consul-ancient-Roman-official), defeated these efforts and, relying on the doubtful legality of a Senate vote in support, had Catiline’s eminent Roman associates executed. Catiline himself fell in a desperate battle.

For Cicero—the “new man” who had made his way to the top by his own oratorical and political skill, obliging everyone by unstinting service, representing Pompey’s interests in Rome while avoiding offense to Pompey’s enemies—this was the climax of his life. Like his compatriot Marius, he had saved the state for its rulers: he had taken resolute action when those rulers were weak and vacillating; and, like Marius, he got small thanks for it. Pompey was miffed at having to share his fame with a municipal upstart, and eminent gentlemen could not forgive that upstart for having driven patricians to their death.

Pompey’s return was peaceful. Like Marius, he wanted recognition, not [tyranny](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tyranny). He dismissed his army, to the surprise of Crassus and others, and basked in the glory of his triumph and the honours voted to him. But having given up power, he found himself caught in a net of [constitutional](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constitutional) obstruction woven by his politically experienced enemies and was unable to have either of his principal demands met: land for his veterans and the ratification of his arrangements in the East. It was at this point that Caesar returned from Spain.

Gaius [Julius Caesar](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julius-Caesar-Roman-ruler), descended (as he insisted) from kings and gods, had shown talent and ambition in his youth: he opposed Sulla but without inviting punishment, married into the [oligarchy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/oligarchy) but advocated popular causes, vocally defended Pompey’s interests while aiding Crassus in his intrigues and borrowing a fortune from him, flirted with Catiline but refused to dabble in revolution, then worked to save those whom Cicero executed. In 63 he won a startling success: defeating two distinguished principes, he, who had not yet been [praetor](https://www.britannica.com/topic/praetor), was elected pontifex maximus—a post of supreme dignity, power, and patronage. Despite some [cynicism](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cynicism) among Roman aristocrats toward the state religion, its ceremonial was kept up and was a recognized means of political manipulation; thus priesthoods could give more lasting power than magistracies, in addition to the cachet of social success. Young Caesar was now head of the [hierarchy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hierarchy). After his praetorship (62), Caesar successfully governed Spain, clearing a surplus sufficient to pay off his debts. On returning to Rome, he naturally hoped for the consulship of 59; but his enemies, by legal [chicanery](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/chicanery), forced him to choose between standing for office and celebrating a triumph. He gave up the triumph and easily became consul.

## The final collapse of the Roman Republic (59–44 BC)

## Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus

For his consulship Caesar fashioned an improbable alliance: his skill in having won the trust of both Crassus and Pompey enabled him to unite these two enemies in his support. Crassus had the connections, Pompey had the soldiers’ vote, and Caesar was consul and pontifex maximus. The combination (often misleadingly called the “first [Triumvirate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/triumvirate)”) was invincible, especially since the consul Caesar had no scruples about countering legal obstruction with open force. Pompey got what he wanted, and so did Crassus (whose immediate need was a [concession](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/concession) to the Asian tax farmers, in whose companies he probably had much of his capital). In return, Caesar got a special command in [Cisalpine Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cisalpine-Gaul) and Illyricum for five years by vote of the people; the Senate itself, on Pompey’s motion, extended it to [Transalpine Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Transalpine-Gaul). Marriage alliances sealed the compact, chief of them Pompey’s marriage to Caesar’s daughter [Julia](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julia-daughter-of-Julius-Caesar).

Caesar left for Gaul, but Rome was never the same; the shadow of the alliance hung over it, making the old-style politics impossible. In 58 Publius Clodius, another aristocratic demagogue, was tribune and defended Caesar’s interests. Cicero had incurred Clodius’ [enmity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enmity) and was now sacrificed to him: he was driven into exile as having unlawfully executed citizens in 63. By 57 Caesar’s allies had drifted back into rivalry. Pompey secured Cicero’s return, and Cicero at once tried to break up the alliance by attracting Pompey to the Senate’s side. Just when he seemed about to succeed, the three dynasts secretly met and revived their compact (56). Rome had to bow once more. In 55 Pompey and Crassus were consuls, and the contents of their secret agreement were slowly revealed. Caesar, whom his enemies had made efforts to recall, was prolonged in his command for five years and (it later appeared) had been promised another consulship straight after, to secure him against prosecution and give him a chance of another army command. Pompey was given a special command over all of Spain, which he exercised through deputies while he himself remained just outside Rome to keep an eye on the city. Crassus, who now needed glory and new wealth to equal those of his allies, was to attack [Parthia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Parthia) with a large army. Thus the three dynasts would practically monopolize military power for the foreseeable future.

Cicero, among others, had to submit and was thenceforth their loyal spokesman. After his achievement of 63 he had dreamed of leading a coalition of all “right-thinking” men in Italy in defending the traditional [oligarchy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/oligarchy), but he had found little support among the oligarchy. He now used this fact to rationalize his surrender. His brother took service in Gaul under Caesar.

The dynasts’ pact did not even bring peace. Clodius, as tribune, had created a private army, and there was no state force to counter it. Pompey could have done it by calling his soldiers in, but the Senate did not trust him enough to request this, and Pompey did not wish to parade himself as an unashamed tyrant. Other men formed private armies in opposition to Clodius, and one Milo at last managed to have him killed after a scuffle (52). By then, however, Roman politics had radically and unexpectedly changed.

## Political maneuvers

Julia died in 54, breaking the ties between Caesar and Pompey. Caesar pressed Pompey to renew them, but Pompey held off, preserving his freedom of action. [Crassus’](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Licinius-Crassus) Parthian campaign ended in disaster and in Crassus’ death (53). By 52 Pompey and Caesar stood face to face, still nominally friends but with no personal link between them and no common interests. Caesar, by conquering the whole of Gaul, had almost equaled Pompey’s [prestige](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prestige) and, by his utterly ruthless way of waging war, Pompey’s wealth. Unlike Pompey, he used his wealth to dispense patronage and buy useful friends. At this point Pompey cautiously offered the oligarchy his support. It had much to give him that he wanted—control of the administrative machine, respectability, and the seal of public approval. Its leaders (even the [intransigent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intransigent) young Cato, who had led opposition to the three individually long before their alliance and to their joint oppression of the state ever since) now recognized that acceptance of Pompey’s terms and surrender to his protection was their only chance of survival. Pompey at once turned firmly against Milo, who presented a political threat: if Milo could use the force that had killed Clodius to keep firm control of Rome, he—an ambitious man of known [conservative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conservative) views—might in due course offer an [alternative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alternative) and more trustworthy champion to the oligarchy. But he was not yet ready. Pompey forced them to make their choice at once, and they chose Pompey in preference. He was made sole consul and had Milo convicted by an intimidated court. Meanwhile he had made a marriage alliance with the noblest man in Rome, Quintus Metellus Scipio, who became his colleague in the consulship. The state had captured Pompey (or vice versa), and Caesar stood alone in opposition to both of them. During the next two years there were a series of maneuvers: the Senate leaders, with Pompey’s silent support, worked for Caesar’s recall, which would have meant his instantly sharing the fate of Milo; while Caesar and his agents in Rome tried to strike some bargain that would ensure his safety and his future in politics. Finally, Pompey declared himself, and, early in 49, the Senate voted to outlaw Caesar. Two tribunes supporting him (one of them Mark Antony) had to flee. By the time they reached him, Caesar had already crossed the [Rubicon:](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rubicon) he now had a cause.

## [Civil war](https://www.britannica.com/event/Roman-Civil-War)

Pompey had exuded confidence over the outcome if it came to war. In fact, however, Caesar’s veterans were unbeatable, and both men knew it. To the disgust of his followers, Pompey evacuated Rome, then Italy. His plan was to bottle Caesar up in Italy and starve him out. But Caesar, in a lightning sweep, seized Massilia and Spain from Pompey’s commanders, then crossed into Greece, where a short campaign ended in Pompey’s decisive defeat at [Pharsalus](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Pharsalus) (48). Pompey fled to [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt), where he was assassinated by a man hoping thus to curry Caesar’s favour. This was by no means the end of the war. Almost at once Caesar was nearly trapped at [Alexandria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Alexandria-Egypt), where he had intervened in a succession dispute; but he escaped and installed [Cleopatra](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Cleopatra-queen-of-Egypt) on the throne, for personal as well as political reasons. In Africa the Pompeian forces and their native allies were not defeated until Caesar himself moved against them and [annihilated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/annihilated) them at [Thapsus](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Thapsus). Cato, [disdaining](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disdaining) the victor’s pardon, committed suicide at Utica (46). In Spain, where Pompey’s name was still powerful, his sons organized a major rising, which Caesar himself again had to defeat at [Munda](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Munda) (45) in the bloodiest battle of the war. By the time he returned, he had only a few months to live.

**The dictatorship and assassination of Caesar**

In [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome) the administrative machine had inevitably been disrupted, and Caesar had always remained in control, as [consul](https://www.britannica.com/topic/consul-ancient-Roman-official) or as [dictator](https://www.britannica.com/topic/dictator-Roman-official). Those who had feared proscriptions, or hoped for them, were proved wrong. Some of Caesar’s enemies had their property confiscated, but it was sold at fair value; most were pardoned and suffered no loss. One of these was Cicero, who, after much soul-searching, had followed his [conscience](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conscience) by joining [Pompey](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pompey-the-Great) before Pharsalus. Poverty and indebtedness were [alleviated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alleviated), but there was no wholesale cancellation of debts or redistribution of property, and many of Caesar’s adherents were disappointed. Nor was there a general reform of the republic. (Caesar’s only major reform was of the calendar: indeed, the [Julian calendar](https://www.britannica.com/science/Julian-calendar) proved adequate for centuries.) The number of senators and magistrates was increased, the citizenship was more freely given, and the [province](https://www.britannica.com/topic/province-ancient-Roman-government) of [Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Asia-ancient-Roman-province) was relieved of some of its tax burden. But Caesar had no plan for reforming the system—not even to the extent that [Sulla](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sulla) had tried to do, for Sulla had at least planned for his own retirement. For a time, honourable men, such as Cicero, hoped that the “Dictator for Settling the Constitution” (as [Caesar](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julius-Caesar-Roman-ruler) called himself) would produce a real constitution—some return to free institutions. By late 45 that hope was dead. Caesar was everywhere, doing everything to an almost superhuman degree. He had no solution for the crisis of the republic except to embody it in himself and none at all for the hatred of his peers, which he knew this was causing. He began to accept more and more of the honours that a subservient [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history) invidiously offered, until finally he reached a position perilously close to kingship (an accursed term in Rome) and even deification. Whether he passed those hazy boundary lines is much debated and not very important. He had put himself in a position in which no Roman ought to have been and which no Roman aristocrat could tolerate. As a loyal friend of his was later to say: “With all his [genius](https://www.britannica.com/topic/genius-Roman-religion), he saw no way out.” To escape the problem or postpone it, he prepared for a Parthian war to avenge Crassus—a project most likely to have ended in similar disaster. Before he could start on it, about 60 men—former friends and old enemies, honourable patriots and men with grievances—struck him down in the Senate on March 15, 44 BC.

## The Triumvirate and Octavian’s achievement of sole power

[Brutus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Junius-Brutus) and [Cassius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaius-Cassius-Longinus-Roman-quaestor), the organizers of the [conspiracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conspiracy), expected all Romans to rejoice with them in the rebirth of “freedom.” But to the Roman people the freedom of the governing class had never meant very much; the armies (especially in the west) were attached to Caesar; and the Senate was full of Caesarians at all levels, cowed but biding their time. [Mark Antony](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mark-Antony-Roman-triumvir), the surviving consul, whom Brutus had been too scrupulous to assassinate with his master, gradually gained control of the city and the official machinery, and the “liberators” withdrew to the East. But a challenger for the position of leader of the Caesarians soon appeared in the person of [Octavian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-Roman-emperor), Caesar’s son by [adoption](https://www.britannica.com/topic/adoption-kinship) and now his heir. Though not yet 20, Octavian proved an accomplished politician; he attracted loyalty as a Caesarian while cooperating against Antony with the Senate, which, under Cicero’s vigorous leadership, now turned against the consul. Cicero hoped to fragment and thus defeat the Caesarian party, with the help of Brutus and Cassius, who were making good progress in seizing control of the eastern provinces and armies. In 43 the two consuls (both old Caesarian officers) and Octavian defeated Antony at Mutina, and success seemed [imminent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/imminent). But the consuls died, and Octavian demanded and, by armed force, obtained the consulship; and the armies of [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy), Spain, and [Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe) soon showed that they would not fight against one another. Octavian, Antony, and [Lepidus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Aemilius-Lepidus-Roman-statesman-died-13-12-BCE) (the senior Caesarian with an army) now had themselves appointed “[Triumvirs](https://www.britannica.com/topic/triumvirate) for Settling the Constitution” for five years and secured control of Italy by massive proscriptions and confiscations ([Cicero](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Cicero), Antony’s chief enemy, was among the first to die). They then defeated and killed Brutus and Cassius at [Philippi](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Philippi-Roman-history-42-BC) (42) and divided the Roman world among themselves, with Lepidus, a weak man accidentally thrust into prominence, getting the smallest share. Octavian, who was to control Italy, met armed opposition from Antony’s brother and wife, but they got no help from Antony and were defeated at [Perusia](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Battle-of-Perusia) (41). [Octavian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Octavia-wife-of-Mark-Antony) and Antony sealed their alliance with a marriage compact: Antony married Octavia, Octavian’s sister. Octavian then confronted Pompey’s son Sextus [Pompeius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sextus-Pompeius-Magnus-Pius), who had seized control of the islands off Italy. After much diplomatic maneuvering (including another meeting with Antony), Octavian attacked and defeated Sextus; when Lepidus tried to reassert himself, Octavian crushed him and stripped him of his office of Triumvir (while with [conspicuous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conspicuous) piety leaving him the chief pontificate, now an office without power). Octavian now controlled the West and Antony the East, still officially as Triumvirs (their term of office had been extended), even though Lepidus had been eliminated in 36.

Each of the two leaders embarked on campaigns and reorganization in his half—Octavian in Illyricum, Antony particularly on the Parthian frontier. But Antony now married [Cleopatra](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Cleopatra-queen-of-Egypt) and tried to make [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Egypt) his military and political base. In a war of [propaganda](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/propaganda), Octavian gradually convinced the western provinces, Italy, and most of the Roman upper class that Antony was sacrificing Roman interests, trying to become a Hellenistic king in [Alexandria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Alexandria-Egypt), and planning to rule the Roman world from there with Cleopatra. In 32, though he now held no legal position, Octavian intimidated most of Antony’s remaining aristocratic friends into joining him, made the whole West swear [allegiance](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/allegiance) to himself, and in 31, as consul, crossed into Greece to attack Antony. On September 2 he defeated Antony and Cleopatra in a naval battle at [Actium](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Actium-ancient-Roman-history). Though in itself not a major victory, it was followed by the disintegration of Antony’s forces, and Antony and Cleopatra finally committed suicide in Alexandria (30).

# Intellectual life of the Late Republic

The late [Roman Republic](https://www.britannica.com/place/Roman-Republic), despite its turmoil, was a period of remarkable [intellectual](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intellectual) ferment. Many of the leading political figures were men of serious intellectual interests and literary achievement; foremost among them were Cicero, Caesar, Cato, Pompey, and Varro, all of them senators. The political upheaval itself leavened intellectual life; imperial senators were to look back to the late republic as a time when great political struggles stimulated great oratory, something the more ordered world of the emperors could no longer do.

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By the beginning of the imperial era the maturing of Roman intellectual [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture) was evident. Caesar had commissioned Varro to organize the first public library in Rome, and Greek scholars such as the geographer [Strabo](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Strabo) moved west to pursue their studies in Rome.

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The best-known poets of the late republican and civil war periods came from well-to-do Italian families. [Catullus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Catullus) from Verona (c. 84–c. 54) had a reputation as doctus (learned) for his exquisitely crafted poems full of literary [allusions](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/allusions) in the Alexandrian style. Far from cumbersome, however, were many of his short, witty poems that challenged traditional Roman mores and deflated senatorial pretensions. Rome’s greatest poets, [Virgil](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Virgil) (70–19) and [Horace](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Horace-Roman-poet) (65–8), were born during the republic, came of age during the civil wars, and survived to celebrate the victory of their patron, Augustus. Virgil’s Eclogues one and nine, written during the civil wars, poignantly evoke the suffering of the upheaval that ironically inspired Rome’s highest intellectual and artistic achievements.

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# The Early Roman Empire (31 BC–AD 193)

## The consolidation of the empire under the Julio-Claudians

## The establishment of the principate under [Augustus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-Roman-emperor)

[Actium](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Actium-ancient-Roman-history) left Octavian the master of the Roman world. This supremacy, successfully maintained until his death more than 40 years later, made him the first of the Roman emperors. Suicide removed Antony and [Cleopatra](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Cleopatra-queen-of-Egypt) and their potential menace in 30 BC, and the [annexation](https://www.britannica.com/topic/annexation) of [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt) with its Ptolemaic treasure brought financial independence. With these reassurances Octavian could begin the task of reconstruction.

| **Roman emperors\*** | |
| --- | --- |
| \*For a list of the Eastern emperors after the fall of Rome, see Byzantine Empire. | |
| [Augustus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-Roman-emperor) (Augustus Caesar) | 27 BC–AD 14 |
| [Tiberius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tiberius) (Tiberius Caesar Augustus) | 14–37 |
| [Caligula](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Caligula-Roman-emperor) (Gaius Caesar Germanicus) | 37–41 |
| [Claudius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Claudius-Roman-emperor) (Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus) | 41–54 |
| [Nero](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nero-Roman-emperor) (Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus) | 54–68 |
| [Galba](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Galba) (Servius Galba Caesar Augustus) | 68–69 |
| [Otho](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Otho) (Marcus Otho Caesar Augustus) | 69 |
| [Vitellius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aulus-Vitellius) (Aulus Vitellius) | 69 |
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Law and [order](https://www.britannica.com/technology/order-architecture) had vanished from the Roman state when its ruling aristocrats refused to curb their individual ambitions, when the most corrupt and violent persons could gain protection for their crimes by promising their support to the ambitious, and when the ambitious and the violent together could thus transform a republic based on [disciplined](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disciplined) liberty into a turbulent cockpit of murderous rivalries. Good government depended on limits being set to unrestrained [aspirations](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aspirations), and Octavian was in a position to impose them. But his military might, though sufficiently strong in 31 BC to guarantee orderly political processes, was itself incompatible with them; nor did he relish the role of military [despot](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/despot). The fate of Julius Caesar, an eagerness to acquire political respectability, and his own esteem for ancestral custom combined to dissuade Octavian from it. He wished to be, in his own words, “the author of the best civilian government possible.” His problem was to regularize his own position so as to make it generally acceptable, without simultaneously reopening the door to violent lawlessness. His [pragmatic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pragmatic) responses not only ensured stability and [continuity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/continuity) but also respected republican forms and traditions so far as possible.

Large-scale demobilization allayed people’s fears; regular consular elections raised their hopes. In 29–28 BC Octavian carried out, with [Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Vipsanius-Agrippa), his powerful deputy, the first census of the Roman people since 70; and this involved drawing up an electoral roll for the Centuriate Assembly. Elections followed, and Octavian was inevitably chosen consul. Then, on Jan. 13, 27 BC, he offered to lay down his powers. The Roman [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history) rejected this proposal, charging him instead to administer (besides Egypt) Spain, [Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe), and [Syria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria) for the next 10 years, while it itself was to supervise the rest of the [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science). Three days later, among other honours, it bestowed upon him the name by which he has ever since been known, Augustus.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/10/196710-050-83358F44/Augustus-statue-Rome.jpg)

[**Augustus**](https://cdn.britannica.com/10/196710-050-83358F44/Augustus-statue-Rome.jpg)

Augustus, statue in Rome.

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As most of the troops still under arms were in the regions entrusted to Augustus’ charge, the arrangements of 27 BC hardly affected his military strength. Moreover, so long as he was [consul](https://www.britannica.com/topic/consul-ancient-Roman-official) (he was reelected every year until 23 BC), he was civilian head of government as well. In other words, he was still preeminent and all-powerful, even if he had, in his own words, placed the [*res publica*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/res-publica) at the disposal of the Senate and the Roman people. Augustus particularly wished to conciliate the senatorial class, without whose cooperation civilian government was impossible. But his monopolization of the consulship offended the Senate, making a different arrangement clearly necessary. Accordingly, in 23 Augustus made a change; he vacated the consulship and never held it again (except momentarily in 5 BC and again in 2 BC, for a limited, specific purpose). In its place he received the tribunician power (*tribunicia potestas*). He could not become an actual [plebeian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/plebeian) [tribune](https://www.britannica.com/topic/tribune-Roman-official), because Julius Caesar’s action of making him a [patrician](https://www.britannica.com/topic/patrician) had disqualified him for the office. But he could acquire the rights and privileges pertaining to the office; and they were conferred upon him, apparently by the Senate, whose action was then ratified by the popular assembly. He had already been enjoying some of a tribune’s privileges since 36; but he now acquired them all and even some additional ones, such as the right to [convene](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/convene) the Senate whenever he chose and to enjoy priority in bringing business before it. Through his tribunician power he could also summon the popular assembly and participate fully in its proceedings. Clearly, although no longer consul, he still retained the legal right to authority in civilian affairs.

The arrangement of 23 entailed an additional advantage. The power of the plebeian tribune was traditionally associated with the protection of citizens, and Augustus’ acquisition of it was therefore unlikely to rouse resentment. Indeed, Augustus thenceforth shrewdly [propagated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/propagated) the notion that, if his position in the state was exceptional (which it clearly was), it was precisely because of his tribunician power. Although he held it for only one year at a time, it was indefinitely renewable and was pronounced his for life. Thus, it was both annual and perpetual and was a suitable vehicle for numbering the years of his supremacy. His era (and this is true also of later emperors) was counted officially from the year when he acquired the tribunician power.

The year 23 likewise clarified the legal basis for Augustus’ control of his *provincia* (the region under his jurisdiction) and its armed forces. The Senate invested him with an *imperium proconsulare* (governorship and high command), and, while this had a time limit, it was automatically renewed whenever it lapsed (usually every 10 years). This proconsular [*imperium*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/imperium-Roman-law), furthermore, was pronounced valid inside [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy), even inside [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome) and the *pomerium* (the boundary within which only Roman gods could be worshiped and civil magistrates rule), and it was superior (*majus*) to the *imperium* of any other proconsul. Thus, Augustus could intervene legally in any [province](https://www.britannica.com/topic/province-ancient-Roman-government), even in one entrusted to someone else.

The network of favours owed him that Augustus had [cultivated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultivated) within the state, among people of the greatest authority over their own networks, made his position virtually unassailable, but he avoided provoking this high class of his supporters, senatorial and equestrian, by not drawing attention to the most novel and autocratic of the many grants of power he had received, the *imperium proconsulare majus*. Instead, he paraded the tribunician power as the expression of his supreme position in the state.

After 23 no fundamental change in Augustus’ position occurred. He felt no need to hold offices that in republican times would have conferred exceptional power (e.g., dictatorship, lifetime censorship, or regular consulship), even though these were offered him. Honours, of course, came his way: in 19 BC he received some consular rights and [prerogatives](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prerogatives), presumably to ensure that his *imperium* was in no particular inferior to a consul’s; in 12, when Lepidus died, he became [*pontifex maximus*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/pontifex-maximus) (he had long since been elected into all of the priestly colleges); in 8 BC the [8th month](https://www.britannica.com/topic/August-month) of the year was named after him; in 2 BC he was designated *pater patriae* (“father of his country”), a distinction that he particularly esteemed because it suggested that he was to all Romans what a *paterfamilias* was to his own household. He also accepted special commissions from time to time: e.g., the supervision of the supply of grain and water, the maintenance of public buildings (including temples), the regulation of the Tiber, the superintendence of the police and fire-fighting services, and the upkeep of Italy’s roads. Such behaviour advertised his will and capacity to improve the lives of people dependent on him. Of that capacity, [manifest](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manifest) on a grand scale, his tribunician power and proconsular *imperium* were only the formal expression. He was a [charismatic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/charismatic) leader of unrivaled [prestige](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prestige) (*auctoritas*), whose merest suggestions were binding.

Like an ordinary Roman, he contented himself with three names. His, however, Imperator Caesar Augustus, were absolutely unique, with a magic all their own that caused all later emperors to appropriate them, at first selectively but after AD 69 in their entirety. Thereby they became titles, reserved for the emperor (or, in the case of the name Caesar, for his heir apparent); from them derive the titles emperor, kaiser, and tsar. Yet, as used by Augustus and his first four successors, the words Imperator Caesar Augustus were names, not titles—that is, respectively, praenomen, nomen (in effect), and cognomen. One title that Augustus did have was [princeps](https://www.britannica.com/topic/princeps) (prince); this, however, was unofficial—a mere popular label, meaning Rome’s first citizen—and government documents such as inscriptions or coins do not apply it to Augustus. But because of it the system of government he devised is called the [principate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/principate).

# The Roman Senate and the urban magistracies

[Augustus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-Roman-emperor) regarded the [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history), whose leading member (princeps senatus) he had become in 28, as a body with important functions; it heard fewer overseas embassies than formerly, but otherwise its dignity and authority seemed unimpaired; its members filled the highest offices; its decrees, although not formally called laws, were just as binding; it soon became a high court, whose verdicts were unappealable; it supervised the older provinces and nominally the state finances as well, and it also in effect elected the urban magistrates; formally, even the emperor’s powers derived from the Senate. Nevertheless, it lacked real power. Its provinces contained few troops (and by AD 40 it had ceased to control even these few). Hence, it could hardly dispute Augustus’ wishes. In fact, real power rested with Augustus, who superintended state finances and above all controlled membership in the Senate; every senator’s career depended on his goodwill. But he valued the Senate as the repository of the true Roman spirit and traditions and as the body representing [public opinion](https://www.britannica.com/topic/public-opinion). He was considerate toward it, shrewdly anticipated its reactions, and generally avoided [contention](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/contention) with it. He regularly kept it informed about his activities; and an imperial council (Consilium Principis), which he consulted on matters of policy, in the manner of a republican magistrate seeking the opinion of his advisory committee, consisted of the consuls, certain other magistrates, and 15 senators—not handpicked by him but chosen by lot every six months.

To rid the Senate of unworthy members, he reduced its numbers by successive reviews to about 600 (from the triumviral 1,000 or more). Sons of senators and men of good repute and substance who had served in the army and the vigintiviri (“board of twenty,” minor magistracy) could become members by being elected, at age 25 or over, to the quaestorship. Their subsequent rank in the Senate depended on what other magistracies they managed to win; these were, in ascending [order](https://www.britannica.com/technology/order-architecture), the aedileship (or [plebeian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/plebeian) tribunate), the praetorship, and the consulship. No one disliked by Augustus could expect to reach any of them, while anyone whom he nominated or [endorsed](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/endorsed) was sure of election. Despite the emperor’s control, there were usually enough candidates for keen contests. By AD 5 destinatio seems to have been the practice—that is, a special panel of senators and [equites](https://www.britannica.com/topic/eques) selected the praetors and consuls, and the comitia centuriata automatically ratified their choice. In about AD 5, likewise, the consulship was shortened to six months. This not only gratified senators and increased the number of high-ranking qualified officials but also showed that the consuls’ duties were becoming largely ceremonial. This was also true, but to a far lesser degree, of the other unpaid magistrates. A senator really made his mark in between his magistracies, when he served in important salaried posts, military or civilian or both, sometimes far from [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome).

## The equestrian order

Senators, however, were either too proud or too few to fill all the posts. Some posts were considered menial and went to the emperor’s freedmen or slaves. Others were entrusted to equites, and the [equestrian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/eques) order soon developed into one of the great institutions of the [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science). Augustus decided that membership in the order should be open to Roman citizens of means and reputation but not necessarily of good birth. Ultimately, there were thousands of equites throughout the empire. Although this was a lower [aristocracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aristocracy), a good career was available to them. After tours of duty as an army officer (the so-called militiae equestres), an aspiring eques might serve as the emperor’s agent (procurator) in various capacities and eventually become one of the powerful prefects (of the fleet, of the vigiles, or fire brigade, of the grain supply, of Egypt, or of the Praetorian Guard). This kind of an equestrian career became standardized only under Claudius I; but Augustus began the system and, by his use of equites in responsible posts, founded the imperial [civil service](https://www.britannica.com/topic/civil-service), which later was headed chiefly by them. The equites also performed another function: the senatorial order had difficulty in maintaining its numbers from its own ranks and depended on recruitment from below, which meant from the equestrian order. Because this order was not confined to Rome or even to [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy), the Senate gradually acquired a non-Italian element. The western provinces were already supplying senators under Augustus.

**Administration of Rome and Italy**

Ordinary Roman citizens who were neither senators nor equites were of lesser consequence. Although still used, the old formula senatus populusque Romanus (“the Senate and the Roman people”) had changed its meaning: in effect, its populusque Romanus portion now meant “the emperor.” The “Roman people” had become the “Italian people,” and it was embodied in the person of Augustus, himself the native of an Italian town. To reduce the risk of popular demonstrations in Rome, the emperor provided grain doles, occasional donatives, and various entertainments; but he allowed the populace no real power. After AD 5 the Roman people’s participation in public life consisted in the formality of holding occasional assemblies to ratify decisions made elsewhere. Ultimately, this caused the distinction between the Roman citizens of Italy and the provincial inhabitants of the overseas empire to disappear; under Augustus, however, the primacy of Italy was insistently emphasized.

Indeed, Italy and [justice](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/justice) for its inhabitants were Augustus’ first cares. Arbitrary triumviral legislation was pronounced invalid after 29 BC, and ordinary Roman citizens everywhere had access to Augustus’ own court of appeal (his appellate jurisdiction dated from 30 BC and in effect replaced the republican appeal to the people). His [praetorian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Praetorian-Guard) and urban cohorts provided physical security; his officials assured grain supplies; and he himself, with help from such aides as Agrippa, monumentalized Italian towns. The numerous Augustan structures in Italy and Rome (as he boasted, a city of brick before his time and of [marble](https://www.britannica.com/science/marble-rock) afterward) have mostly perished, but impressive ruins survive (e.g., [aqueduct](https://www.britannica.com/technology/aqueduct-engineering), [forum](https://www.britannica.com/topic/forum-ancient-Rome), and mausoleum in Rome; bridge at Narni; [arch](https://www.britannica.com/technology/arch-architecture) at Fano; gate at Perugia). Doubtless their construction [alleviated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alleviated) unemployment, especially among the proletariat at Rome. But economic considerations did not influence Augustus’ policies much (customs tariffs, for instance, were for fiscal, not protective, purposes), nor did he build harbour works at [Ostia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ostia), Rome’s port. Italian commerce and industry—notably fine pottery, the so-called terra sigillata, and wine—nevertheless flourished in the conditions he created. Public finances, mints, and coinage issues, chaotic before him, were placed on a sound basis, partly by the introduction of a [sales tax](https://www.britannica.com/topic/sales-tax) and of a new levy (inheritance taxes) on Roman citizens—who hitherto had been subject only to harbour dues and manumission (see below) charges—and partly by means of repeated subventions to the public treasury (aerarium Saturni) from Augustus’ own enormous private resources (patrimonium Caesaris). His many highways also contributed to Italy’s economic betterment.

Augustus’ great achievement in Italy, however, was to restore morale and unify the country. The violence and self-aggrandizement of the 1st century BC had bred [apathy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apathy) and corruption. To reawaken a sense of responsibility, especially in official and administrative circles, Augustus reaffirmed traditional Italian virtues (by laws aimed against adultery, by strengthening [family](https://www.britannica.com/topic/family-kinship) ties, and by stimulating the birth rate) and revived ancestral [religion](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-religion) (by repairing temples, building new shrines, and reactivating [moribund](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moribund) cults and rituals). To infuse fresh blood and energy into disillusioned Roman society, he promoted the assimilation of Italy: the elite of its municipal towns entered the Roman Senate, and Italy became firmly one with Rome. To keep the citizen body pure, he made [manumission](https://www.britannica.com/topic/manumission) of slaves difficult, and from those irregularly manumitted he withheld the citizenship.

## Administration of the [provinces](https://www.britannica.com/topic/province-ancient-Roman-government)

Sharply distinguished from Italy were the provinces of the empire. From 27 BC on they were of two types. The Senate supervised the long-established ones, the so-called public provinces: their governors were chosen by lot, usually served for a year, commanded no troops, and were called [proconsuls](https://www.britannica.com/topic/proconsul-ancient-Roman-official) (although only those superintending [Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Asia-ancient-Roman-province) and Africa were in fact former consuls, the others being former praetors). The emperor supervised all other provinces, and collectively they made up his provincia: he appointed their governors, and these served at his pleasure, none with the title of proconsul because in his own provincia proconsular imperium was wielded by him alone. These imperial provinces might be “unarmed,” but many of them were garrisoned, some quite heavily. Those containing more than one [legion](https://www.britannica.com/topic/legion) were entrusted to former consuls and those with a legion or less to former praetors; in both cases their governors were called [*legati Augusti pro praetore*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/legatus-Augusti-pro-praetore) (“legates of Augustus with authority of a praetor”). There were also some imperial provinces governed not by senators but by equites (usually styled procurators but sometimes prefects); Judaea at the time of Christ’s crucifixion was such an equestrian [province](https://www.britannica.com/topic/province-ancient-Roman-government), [Pontius Pilate](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pontius-Pilate) being its governor. An entirely exceptional imperial province was [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Egypt), so jealously guarded that no senator could visit it without express permission; its prefect was unique in being an equestrian in command of legions.

The provinces paid tribute, which helped to pay for the armed services, various benefactions to supporters, a growing palace staff, and the public-works programs. Periodical censuses, carefully listing provincial resources, provided the basis for the two direct taxes: tributum soli, exacted from occupiers of provincial soil, and tributum capitis, paid on other forms of property (it was not a [poll tax](https://www.britannica.com/topic/poll-tax), except in Egypt and in certain backward areas). In addition, the provinces paid indirect taxes, such as harbour dues. In imperial provinces the direct taxes (tributa) were paid to the emperor’s procurator, an equestrian official largely independent of the governor. In senatorial provinces, [quaestors](https://www.britannica.com/topic/quaestor-ancient-Roman-official) supervised the finances; but, increasingly, imperial procurators also appeared. The indirect taxes (vectigalia) were still collected by [*publicani*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/publican), who were now much more rigorously controlled and gradually replaced by imperial civil servants.

To reward his troops after faithful service, Caesar had settled them on lands mostly in the provinces, in veteran towns; and Augustus, for the same reason and to reduce the dangerous military presence in the state generally, resorted to the same procedure on a vast scale. Thus, in the space of a single generation, more than 120 new centres were organized across the empire in an explosion of urbanizing energy never equaled or even approached in later times. In the settlements called [*coloniae*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/colony-ancient-Roman-settlement) all residents were to be Roman citizens, and the form of government and many other aspects of life specified in their charters bore a thoroughly Roman character. Some coloniae, in further approximation to Italian models, enjoyed exemption from tribute. In the [*municipia*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/municipium) only persons elected as magistrates were awarded Roman citizenship (after [Hadrian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hadrian), in Africa, admission was sometimes extended to the whole of the local senate); but the whole of the local aristocracy in the course of time would be in this way gradually incorporated fully into the state. In municipia, too, charters specified Roman forms of government. Urban centres that were wholly noncitizen, called [*civitates*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/civitas), enjoyed [autonomy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/autonomy) in their own affairs, under the governor’s eye; they paid taxes and administered the rural territory around them. In the west, many of them were eventually granted the status of municipia, and they adopted the originally Italian magistracies (duoviri and aediles, collectively quattuorviri) and senate (curia or ordo), normally numbering 100 members. The entire West rapidly came under the administration of urban centres of these three forms, without which the central government could never have done its job. Moreover, these centres radiated economic and cultural influence around them and so had an immense effect, particularly on the way of life of the more backward areas. In the east, however, urban centres, though equally important for government purposes, had already been in existence and long settled into their own [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture) and forms of government.

The provinces were generally better off under the empire. Appointment over them as governor was now and henceforth generally granted with the emperor’s approval. Because he thought of himself as in some ways the patron and defender of the provincial population, lax or extortionate officials could expect some loss of imperial favour, an end to their careers, or an even more severe punishment.

## Emperor worship

For this priceless gift of peace many individuals and even whole [communities](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/communities), in Italy and elsewhere, expressed their thanks spontaneously by worshiping Augustus and his family. [Emperor](https://www.britannica.com/topic/emperor-title) worship was also encouraged officially, however, as a focus of common loyalty for the polyglot empire. In the provinces, to emphasize the superiority of Italy, the official [cult](https://www.britannica.com/topic/ruler-cult) was dedicated to Roma et Augustus; to celebrate it, representatives from provincial communities or groups of communities met in an assembly (Consilium Provinciae), which incidentally might air grievances as well as satisfactions. (This system began in the Greek-speaking provinces, long used to wooing their rulers with divine honours. It penetrated the west only slowly, but from 12 BC an assembly for the three imperial Gallic provinces existed at Lugdunum.) In Italy the official cult was to the genius Augusti (the life spirit of his family); it was coupled in Rome with the Lares Compitales (the spirits of his ancestors). Its principal custodians (seviri Augustales) were normally freedmen. Both the Senate and the emperor had central control over the institution. The Senate could withhold a vote of posthumous [deification](https://www.britannica.com/topic/deification), and the emperor could acknowledge or refuse provincial [initiatives](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/initiatives) in the establishment of emperor worship, in the construction for it, or in its liturgical details. The energy, however, that infused emperor worship was to be found almost wholly among the local nobilities.

## The army

It was Augustus’ soldiers, however, not his worshipers, who made him all-powerful. Their [allegiance](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/allegiance), like the name Caesar, was inherited from his “father,” the deified Julius. The allegiance was to the emperor personally, through a military oath taken in his name every January 1; and the soldiers owed it after his death to his son or chosen successor. This preference of theirs for legitimacy could not be ignored because they were now a standing army, something that the republic had lacked. Demobilization reduced the 60 [legions](https://www.britannica.com/topic/legion) of Actium to 28, a number hardly sufficient but all that Augustus’ [prudence](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prudence) or economy would [countenance](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/countenance). These became permanent formations, each with its own number and name; the soldiers serving in them were called legionaries. Besides the legionaries there was a somewhat smaller body of [auxiliaries](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/auxiliaries), or supporting troops. The two corps together numbered more than a quarter of a million men. To them must be added the garrison of Italy—the praetorian cohorts, or emperor’s bodyguard, about 10,000 strong—and the marines of the imperial fleet, which had its main headquarters at [Misenum](https://www.britannica.com/place/Misenum) and [Ravenna](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ravenna-Italy) in Italy and subsidiary stations and flotillas on seas and rivers elsewhere (the marines, however, were not reckoned good combat forces). All these troops were long-service professionals—the praetorians serving 16 years; legionaries, 20; auxiliaries, 25; and marines, 28—with differing pay scales, the praetorians’ being the highest. In addition to their pay, the men received donatives, shares of booty, and retirement bonuses from a special treasury ([*aerarium militare*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/aerarium-militare)) established in AD 6 and maintained out of the sales tax and Roman citizens’ death duties. Under Augustus the praetorians were normally Italians, but many legionaries and virtually all auxiliaries were provincials, mainly from the imperial provinces in the west, the legionaries coming from municipal towns and the auxiliaries from tribal areas. The tendency to use provincials grew, and by the year 100 the Roman imperial army was overwhelmingly non-Italian. Nevertheless, it helped greatly to Romanize the empire. The legionaries were Roman citizens from the day they enlisted, if not before, and the auxiliaries (after Claudius anyway) from the day they were discharged; and, though serving soldiers could not legally marry, many had mistresses whose children often became Roman citizens. The troops, other than praetorians and marines, passed their years of service in the “armed” imperial provinces—the auxiliaries in forts near the frontier and the legionaries at some distance from it in camps that showed an increasing tendency, especially after AD 69, to become permanent (some of them, indeed, developed into great European cities). There was no central reserve, because, although desirable for emergencies, it might prove dangerous in peacetime.

The officers were naturally Roman citizens. In the legions those of the highest rank ([*legati*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/legate-Roman-official) and [*tribuni*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/military-tribune)) were senators or equites; lower officers ([*centuriones*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/centurion-Roman-military-officer)) might enter directly from Italian or provincial municipalities or might rise through the ranks; by the time they retired, if not sooner, many of them were equites. In the auxiliaries the unit commanders ([*praefecti*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/prefect-ancient-Roman-official)) were equites, often of provincial birth. On retirement the soldiers frequently settled in the provinces where they had served, made friends, and perhaps acquired families. Imperial policy favoured this practice. Thus the army, which had done much to introduce into the provinces Romans of all ranks, with their own way of life, through veteran settlements of the 40s, 30s, and 20s BC, continued in the same role on a more modest and casual scale throughout the Augustan reign and for two centuries or so afterward.

## Foreign policy

After Actium and on two other occasions, Augustus solemnly closed the gates of the shrine of [Janus](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Janus-Roman-god) (a gesture of peace) to show that Rome had peace as well as a princeps. These well-publicized gestures were purely temporary; the gates were swiftly reopened. His proconsular imperium made Augustus the arbiter of peace and war, and an [ostensible](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ostensible) search for defensible frontiers made his a very warlike reign. While the republic had left the limits of Roman territorial claims rather vague and indefinite, he planned conquests stretching to the boundaries defined by nature (deserts, rivers, and ocean shores), not always, however, with immediate [annexation](https://www.britannica.com/topic/annexation) in mind. When annexation did occur, it was followed by the construction of solidly built military roads, paved with thick stone blocks: these also served the official post system ([*cursus publicus*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/cursus-publicus)) and were provided with rest stages and overnight lodges at regular intervals.

Areas where subjugation looked [arduous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/arduous) and where Romanization seemed problematic were left to client kings, dependent on the emperor’s support and goodwill and under obligation to render military aid to Rome. Such satellite kingdoms spared Augustus the trouble and expense of maintaining strong defenses everywhere; nevertheless, their ultimate and intended destiny was incorporation as soon as it suited their overlord’s convenience. Usually, territory was gained more easily by creating and subsequently incorporating a client kingdom than by launching an expansionist war.

In the south, Augustus found suitable frontiers quickly. In 25 BC an expedition under [Aelius Gallus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aelius-Gallus) opened the [Red Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Red-Sea) to Roman use and simultaneously revealed the [Arabian Desert](https://www.britannica.com/place/Arabian-Desert) as an unsurpassed and, indeed, unsurpassable boundary. The same year [Gaius Petronius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaius-Petronius), the prefect of Egypt, tightened Rome’s grip as far as the First Cataract and established a broad military zone beyond it. The vast region north of the [Sahara](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sahara-desert-Africa) and the [Atlas Mountains](https://www.britannica.com/place/Atlas-Mountains) was also secured (c. 25) after a series of punitive raids against native tribes and the annexation of one client kingdom ([Numidia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Numidia)) and the creation of another ([Mauretania](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mauretania-region-North-Africa)). Three legions, two in Egypt and one in Africa (a senatorial province), policed the southern shore of the Mediterranean.

In the west, consolidation was extended to the Atlantic. [Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe), Julius Caesar’s conquest, was organized as four provinces: senatorial [Narbonensis](https://www.britannica.com/place/Narbonensis) and the imperial three Gauls ([Aquitania](https://www.britannica.com/place/Aquitaine), [Belgica](https://www.britannica.com/place/Belgica-ancient-province-Europe), and [Lugdunensis](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lugdunensis)). In Spain, after Agrippa successfully ended in 19 BC the last campaign that Augustus had launched in person in 26, three provinces were formed: senatorial [Baetica](https://www.britannica.com/place/Baetica) and imperial [Lusitania](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lusitania-Roman-province-Spain) and [Tarraconensis](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tarraconensis). Three legions enforced Roman authority from Gibraltar to the mouth of the Rhine. Augustus ignored the advice of court poets and others to advance still farther and annex Britain.

In the east, [Parthia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Parthia) had demonstrated its power against Crassus and Antony, and Augustus proceeded warily. He retained Antony’s ring of buffer client kingdoms, although he incorporated some, including the most celebrated of them, [Judaea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Judaea); he made it a province in AD 6, respecting, however, some of the customs of its [Jewish](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jew-people) inhabitants. Augustus stationed four legions in [Syria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria) and obviously [envisaged](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/envisaged) the [Euphrates River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Euphrates-River) and the northern extension of the Arabian Desert as the desirable frontier with [Mesopotamia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mesopotamia-historical-region-Asia). Farther north, however, no such natural line existed. North of the [Black Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Black-Sea) the client kingdom of the [Cimmerian Bosporus](https://www.britannica.com/place/Kingdom-of-the-Bosporus), under its successive rulers Asander and Polemo, helped to contain southward and westward thrusts by the [Scythians](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Scythian), an Iranian people related to the Parthians, and this provided protection in the north for Anatolia and its provinces (senatorial Asia and Bithynia-Pontus and imperial [Cilicia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cilicia) and [Galatia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Galatia), the latter a large new province created in 25 BC out of Amyntas’ client kingdom). By a show of force, Augustus’ stepson [Tiberius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tiberius), in 20 BC, recovered the standards lost at Carrhae and installed [Tigranes](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tigranes-II-the-Great) as client king of Armenia. Although Augustan [propaganda](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/propaganda) depicted this as a famous victory, strategic considerations inevitably obliged the Parthians, once they settled their internal, dynastic dissensions, to dispute Roman control of [Armenia](https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Armenia). Thus it can hardly be said that Augustus settled the eastern frontier. Missions were sent to the East repeatedly (Agrippa, 17–13 BC; [Gaius Caesar](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Caligula-Roman-emperor), AD 1–4; [Germanicus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Germanicus), 18–19), and Armenia remained a problem for Augustus’ successors: Tiberius successfully maintained Roman influence there, but Gaius and Claudius failed to do so, leaving Nero with a difficult situation.

In the north, too, there was difficulty. The Alps and their passes were finally subjugated early in Augustus’ reign. This enabled Tiberius and his brother [Drusus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nero-Claudius-Drusus-Germanicus) between 16 and 8 BC to conquer all the way to the great rivers of central Europe. New provinces were created in the [Alps and Tyrol](https://www.britannica.com/place/Maritime-Alps) (Maritime and [Pennine Alps](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pennine-Alps), [Raetia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Raetia), [Noricum](https://www.britannica.com/place/Noricum)) and also farther east (Pannonia, Moesia). Stability along the [Danube](https://www.britannica.com/place/Danube-River) was precariously maintained, under Augustus and later, by means of periodical alliances with [Maroboduus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maroboduus) and his successors, who ruled Germanic tribes such as the [Marcomanni](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Marcomanni) and [Quadi](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Quadi) in Bohemia to the north of the river, and by the existence of a Thracian client kingdom to the south of its lowest course. The push across the [Rhine](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rhine-River) began in 12 BC; although it reached the Elbe, consolidation beyond the Rhine proved [elusive](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/elusive). A revolt in [Pannonia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pannonia) (AD 6–9) interrupted it, and, in AD 9, German tribes under [Arminius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Arminius) [annihilated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/annihilated) [Quinctilius Varus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Publius-Quinctilius-Varus) and three legions in the [Teutoburg Forest](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-the-Teutoburg-Forest). This disaster reduced the number of legions to 25 (it did not reach 28 again until half a century later), and it disheartened Augustus. Old and weary, he withdrew to the Rhine and decided against all further expansion, a policy he urged upon his successor. For the watch on the Rhine the military districts of Upper and Lower [Germany](https://www.britannica.com/place/Germany) were created, containing eight legions between them. Another seven garrisoned the Danubian provinces. These figures reveal imperial anxiety for the northern frontier.

## Economic life

Although widespread, Augustus’ wars chiefly affected the frontier districts. Elsewhere, peace prevailed. Indeed, never before had so large an area been free of war for so long. This state of affairs helped trade. The suppression of piracy and the use of military roads, which the frontier warfare itself brought into being, provided safe arteries of commerce. Stable currency also aided [economic growth](https://www.britannica.com/topic/economic-growth). Activity directly connected with the soil predominated; but there were also many establishments, usually small, engaged in manufacturing, and such products as textiles, pottery, tiles, and papyrus were turned out in surprising quantities. Advanced techniques were also known: [glassblowing](https://www.britannica.com/technology/glassblowing), for example, dates from the Augustan age. Most products were consumed locally, but the specialties or monopolies from any region usually exceeded local needs, and the surplus was sold elsewhere, generating a brisk interchange of goods. Some traveled great distances, even beyond the empire: trade with [India](https://www.britannica.com/place/India), for example, reached respectable proportions once the nature of the monsoon was understood, and the Red Sea was opened to Roman shipping. Merchants, especially Levantines, traveled everywhere, and fairs were frequent. The Mediterranean world was linked together as never before, and standardization made considerable headway. In Augustus’ day Italy was economically the most important part of the empire. It could afford to import on a large scale, thanks partly to provincial tribute but above all to its own large productivity. The eastern provinces, for their part, recovered rapidly from the depredations of the civil wars and were industrially quite advanced. The other provinces were less developed, but they soon ceased being mere suppliers of raw materials; they learned to exploit their natural resources by using new techniques and then began overtaking the more advanced economies of Italy and the Greek-speaking regions. The importance of trade in unifying the empire should not be underestimated.

# [Augustan](https://www.britannica.com/art/Augustan-Age-Latin-literature) art and literature

In 17 BC [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome) held [Secular Games](https://www.britannica.com/sports/Secular-Games), a traditional celebration to announce the entry into a new epoch (saeculum). New it was, for, though Augustus preserved what he could of republican institutions, he added much that was his own. His Rome had become very Italian, and this spirit is reflected in the art and literature of his reign. Its greatest writers were native Italians, and, like the ruler whose program they glorified, they used the traditional as the basis for something new. [Virgil](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Virgil), [Horace](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Horace-Roman-poet), and [Livy](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Livy), as noted above, imitated the writing of classical Greece, but chiefly in form, their tone and outlook being un-Hellenic. It was the glory of [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy) and faith in Rome that inspired Virgil’s Georgics and Aeneid, Horace’s Odes, and the first 10 books of Livy’s history.

In Augustan art a similar [fusion](https://www.britannica.com/art/style-art) was achieved between the prevailing Attic and [Hellenistic](https://www.britannica.com/art/Greek-art) models and Italian naturalism. The sculptured portraits on the [Ara Pacis](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ara-Pacis) (Altar of the Augustan Peace) of 9 BC, for all their lifelike quality, are yet in harmony with the classical poise of the figures, and they strike a fresh note: the stately converging processions (Rome’s imperial [family](https://www.britannica.com/topic/family-kinship) and magistrates on one side; senators, [equites](https://www.britannica.com/topic/eques), and citizens on the other) became the [prototypes](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prototypes) for all later processional reliefs. Augustan painting likewise displays a successful combination of Greek and Roman elements, to judge from the frescoes in the house of Livia on the Palatine. In Augustan architecture, decidedly [conservative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conservative) and Hellenic, the potentialities of curving and vaulted spaces that had been revealed in the earlier 1st century BC were not realized. Building was, however, very active and widespread.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/54/121354-050-6C5347F2/Air-Mother-Earth-Water-wall-marble-relief-13-bce.jpg)

[**exterior wall of the Ara Pacis**](https://cdn.britannica.com/54/121354-050-6C5347F2/Air-Mother-Earth-Water-wall-marble-relief-13-bce.jpg)

Marble relief on the exterior wall of the Ara Pacis, Rome.

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The [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture) of the age undoubtedly attained a high level of excellence, dominated by the personality of the emperor and his accomplishments. Imperial art had already reached full development, a matter of no small moment, because Rome’s political predominance made the spread of its influence inevitable. The Mediterranean world was soon assuming a Roman aspect, and this is a measure of Augustus’ extraordinary achievement. Yet it was an achievement with limitations. His professed aim—to promote stability, peace, security, and prosperity—was irreproachable, but perhaps it was also unexciting. Emphasizing [conservatism](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conservatism) by precept and his own example, he encouraged the simpler virtues of a less sophisticated age, and his success made this sedate but rather static outlook fashionable. People accepted the routine of his continuing rule, at the cost, however, of some loss of [intellectual](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intellectual) energy and [moral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moral) fervour. The great literature, significantly, belongs to the years near Actium, when people’s imagination still nursed heady visions of Roman victory and Italian destiny. After the [Secular](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Secular) Games the atmosphere became more commonplace and produced the frivolities of [Ovid](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ovid-Roman-poet) and the pedestrian later books of Livy.

**Appraisal of Augustus**

Augustus’ position as [princeps](https://www.britannica.com/topic/princeps) cannot be defined simply. He was neither a Roman king (rex) nor a Hellenistic monarch (basileus), nor was he, as the 19th-century German historian [Theodor Mommsen](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Theodor-Mommsen) thought, a partner with the [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history) in a dyarchy. He posed as the first servant of an [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science) over which the Roman Senate presided, and it would appear that his claim to have accepted no office inconsistent with ancestral custom was literally true. [Proconsular](https://www.britannica.com/topic/proconsul-ancient-Roman-official) [*imperium*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/imperium-Roman-law) was a republican institution, and, although [tribunician](https://www.britannica.com/topic/tribune-Roman-official) power was not, it contained nothing specifically unrepublican. But, while precedents can be cited for Augustus’ various powers, their concentration and [tenure](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tenure) were absolutely unparalleled. Under the republic, powers like his would have been distributed among several holders, each serving for a limited period with a colleague. Augustus wielded them all, by himself, simultaneously and without any time limit (in practice, at least). This fact made him an [emperor](https://www.britannica.com/topic/emperor-title), but it did not necessarily make him a military tyrant.

In discharging both military and civilian functions, Augustus was no different from republican consuls or praetors. Admittedly his military power was overwhelming; but, if he chose not to brandish it, the tone of his reign could remain essentially civilian. [Constitutional](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Constitutional) safeguards were indeed lacking; everything was at the emperor’s discretion, and even Augustus passed legislation that made anti-imperial behaviour, real or suspected, treasonable (men were, in fact, executed for [conspiracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conspiracy) during his reign). But there had been no constitutional safeguards in the republic, under [Sulla](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sulla), Pompey, the triumvirs, or even Julius Caesar. Augustus’ improved police services probably made lower-class Romans at least feel safer under him. The senatorial class, however, contained a minority resentful of the sheer undeniable preponderance of the princeps’ power, and he was the target of several unsuccessful plots against his life.

The [principate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/principate) was something personal, what the emperor chose to make it, and the relations prevailing between emperor and Senate usually indicated what a reign was like. In Augustus’ case they reveal a regime that was outwardly constitutional, generally moderate, and certainly effective. But, as he himself implied at the end of his life, he was a skillful actor in life’s comedy. Later emperors lacked his sureness of touch.

When Augustus died, the Senate unhesitatingly pronounced him [*divus*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/divus)—the deified one who had restored peace, organized a standing army to defend the frontiers, expanded those frontiers farther than any previous Roman, improved administrative practices everywhere, promoted better standards of public and private behaviour, [integrated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/integrated) Rome and Italy, embellished Rome, [reconciled](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reconciled) the provinces, expedited Romanization, and above all maintained law and [order](https://www.britannica.com/technology/order-architecture) while respecting republican traditions.

Augustus’ luck was hardly inferior to his statecraft. Despite indifferent health, he headed the Roman state in one capacity or another for 56 years. His rule, one of the longest in European history, consolidated the principate so firmly that what might have been an episode became an epoch. At his death there was practically no one left with any personal memory of the republic, and Augustus’ wish came true: he had fashioned a lasting as well as [constitutional government](https://www.britannica.com/topic/constitutionalism). The principate endured with only minor changes for about 200 years.

## The succession

Like any great Roman magnate, Augustus owed it to his supporters and dependents to maintain the structure of power which they [constituted](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constituted) together and which would normally pass from father to son. In accepting the heritage from Caesar, he had only done the right thing, and he was respected for it by his peers. None of them would have advised him later to dismantle what he had since added to it. When, for instance, he was away from Rome, rather than accepting a diminution in his [prerogatives](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prerogatives) of administration, a senator as city [prefect](https://www.britannica.com/topic/prefect-ancient-Roman-official) was deputed to represent him. Consequently, Augustus began thinking early about who should follow him. The soldiers’ views on legitimacy reinforced his own natural desire to found a [dynasty](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Julio-Claudian-dynasty), but he had no son and was therefore obliged to select his successor. Death played havoc with his attempts to do so. His nephew Marcellus, his son-in-law Agrippa, his grandsons Gaius and Lucius (Julia’s children by Agrippa), were groomed in turn; but they all predeceased him. Augustus, finally and reluctantly, chose a member of the republican nobility, his stepson [Tiberius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tiberius), a scion of the ultra-aristocratic Claudii. In AD 4 [Augustus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-Roman-emperor) adopted Tiberius as his son and had tribunician power and probably proconsular imperium as well conferred upon him. This arrangement was confirmed in 13, and, when Augustus died the following year, Tiberius automatically became emperor.

Tiberius (ruled 14–37), during whose reign Christ was crucified, was a soldier and administrator of proved capability but of a reserved and moody temperament that engendered misunderstanding and unpopularity. [Slander](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Slander) blamed him for the death in 19 of his nephew and heir apparent, the popular [Germanicus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Germanicus); and, when informers (delatores), who functioned at Rome like public prosecutors, charged notables with treason, Tiberius was thought to encourage them. By concentrating the praetorian cohorts in a camp adjoining Rome, he increased the soldiers’ scope for mischief-making without building any real security, and in 26 he left Rome permanently for the island of [Capreae](https://www.britannica.com/place/Island-of-Capri) (Capri), entrusting Rome to the care of the city prefect. Tiberius heeded the aged Augustus’ advice and did not extend the empire. (The [annexation](https://www.britannica.com/topic/annexation) of [Cappadocia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cappadocia), a client kingdom, represented no departure from Augustan policy.) In general he took his duties seriously; however, by administering the empire from Capreae he offended the Senate and was never fully trusted, much less really liked. At his death he was not pronounced divus. His great-nephew, Germanicus’ son Gaius, succeeded him.

Gaius (better known by his nickname, [Caligula](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Caligula-Roman-emperor), meaning Little Boot) ruled from 37 to 41 with the absolutism of an Oriental monarch: his short reign was filled with reckless spending, [callous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/callous) murders, and humiliation of the Senate. Gaius’ [foreign policy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/foreign-policy) was inept. Projected annexation proved abortive in Britain; it touched off heavy fighting in Mauretania. In [Judaea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Judaea) and [Alexandria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Alexandria-Egypt), Gaius’ [contemptuous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/contemptuous) disregard of [Jewish](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jew-people) [sentiment](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sentiment) provoked near rebellion. When assassination ended his [tyranny](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tyranny), the Senate contemplated restoration of the republic but was obliged by the [Praetorian Guard](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Praetorian-Guard) to recognize [Claudius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Claudius-Roman-emperor), Germanicus’ brother and therefore Gaius’ uncle, as emperor.

Claudius I (ruled 41–54) went far beyond Augustus and Tiberius in centralizing [government administration](https://www.britannica.com/topic/public-administration) and, particularly, state finances in the imperial household. His freedmen secretaries consequently acquired great power; they were in effect directors of government bureaus. Claudius himself displayed much interest in the empire overseas; he enlarged it significantly, incorporating client kingdoms ([Mauretania](https://www.britannica.com/place/Mauretania-region-North-Africa) in 42; [Lycia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lycia), 43; [Thrace](https://www.britannica.com/place/Thrace), 46) and, more important, annexing [Britain](https://www.britannica.com/place/Britain). Conquest of Britain began in 43, Claudius himself participating in the campaign; the southeast was soon overrun, a colonia established at Camulodunum (Colchester) and a municipium at [Verulamium](https://www.britannica.com/place/Verulamium) (St. Albans), while Londinium ([London](https://www.britannica.com/place/London)) burgeoned into an important entrepôt. Claudius also promoted Romanization, especially in the western provinces, by liberally granting Roman citizenship, by founding coloniae, and by inducting provincials directly into the Senate—he became [censor](https://www.britannica.com/topic/censor-ancient-Roman-official) in 47 and added to the Senate men he wanted, bestowing appropriate quaestorian or praetorian rank upon them to spare the maturer ones among them the necessity of holding junior magistracies; lest existing senators take offense, he elevated some of them to [patrician](https://www.britannica.com/topic/patrician) status (a form of patronage often used by later emperors). Claudius’ provincial policies made the primacy of Italy less pronounced, although that was hardly his aim. In fact, he did much for Italy, improving its harbours, roads, and municipal administration and draining its marshy districts. The execution of many senators and equites, the insolence and venality of his freedmen, the excessive influence of his wives, and even his bodily infirmities combined to make him unpopular. Nevertheless, when he died (murdered probably by his fourth wife, [Julia Agrippina](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julia-Agrippina), Augustus’ great-granddaughter, who was impatient for the succession of the 16-year-old [Nero](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nero-Roman-emperor), her son by an earlier marriage), he was pronounced divus.

Nero (ruled 54–68) left administration to capable advisers for a few years but then asserted himself as a vicious [despot](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/despot). He murdered successively his stepbrother Britannicus, his mother Julia Agrippina, his wife Octavia, and his tutor [Seneca](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucius-Annaeus-Seneca-Roman-philosopher-and-statesman). He also executed many Christians, accusing them of starting the great fire of Rome in 64 (this is the first recorded Christian persecution). In Rome his reliance on Oriental favourites and his general misgovernment led to a conspiracy by [Gaius Calpurnius Piso](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaius-Calpurnius-Piso) in 65, but it was suppressed, leading to yet more executions; the victims included the poet [Lucan](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucan-Roman-author). The empire was not enlarged under this unwarlike emperor, but it was called upon to put down serious disorders. In Britain in 60–61 the rapacity and brutality of Roman officials provoked a furious uprising under Queen [Boudicca](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Boudicca); thousands were slaughtered, and Camulodunum, Vernulamium, and Londinium were destroyed. In the east a major military effort under [Corbulo](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gnaeus-Domitius-Corbulo), Rome’s foremost general, was required (62–65) to reestablish Roman prestige; a compromise settlement was reached, with the Romans accepting the Parthian nominee in Armenia and the Parthians recognizing him as Rome’s client king. In 66, however, revolt flared in Judaea, fired by Roman cruelty and stupidity, Jewish fanaticism, and communal hatreds; the prefect of [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt), Julius Alexander, prevented involvement of the Jews of the [Diaspora](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Diaspora-Judaism). An army was sent to Judaea under [Titus Flavius Vespasianus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vespasian) to restore order; but it had not completed its task when two provincial governors in the west rebelled against Nero—Julius Vindex in [Gallia Lugdunensis](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lugdunensis) and Sulpicius Galba in [Hispania](https://www.britannica.com/place/Hispania-ancient-region-Iberian-Peninsula) Tarraconensis. When the praetorians in Rome also renounced their [allegiance](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/allegiance), Nero lost his nerve and committed suicide. He brought the [Julio-Claudian dynasty](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Julio-Claudian-dynasty) to an [ignominious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ignominious) end by being the first emperor to suffer damnatio memoriae—his reign was officially stricken from the record by order of the Senate.

## Growth of the empire under the Flavians and Antonines

## The year of the four emperors

Nero’s death ushered in the so-called year of the four emperors. The extinction of the Julio-Claudian imperial house robbed the soldiers of a focus for their allegiance, and civil war between the different armies ensued. The army of Upper Germany, after crushing [Vindex](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaius-Julius-Vindex), urged its commander, [Verginius Rufus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucius-Verginius-Rufus), to seize the purple for himself. But he elected to support [Galba](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Galba)—scion of a republican patrician family claiming descent from [Jupiter](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jupiter-Roman-god) and Pasiphae—who was recognized as emperor by the Senate. However, the treasury, emptied by Nero’s extravagance, imposed a stringent economy, and this bred unpopularity for Galba; his age (73) was also against him, and unrest grew. Early in January 69 the Rhineland armies acclaimed [Aulus Vitellius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aulus-Vitellius), commander in Lower Germany; at Rome the praetorians preferred [Marcus Salvius Otho](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Otho), whom Galba had alienated by choosing a descendant of the old republican [aristocracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aristocracy) for his successor. Otho promptly procured Galba’s murder and obtained senatorial recognition; this ended the monopoly of the purple for the republican nobility.

Otho, however, lasted only three months; defeated at Bedriacum, near Cremona in northern Italy, by Vitellius’ powerful Rhineland army, he committed suicide (April 69). The Senate thereupon recognized Vitellius; but the soldiers along the Danube and in the east supported [Vespasianus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vespasian), the commander in Judaea. In a second battle near Bedriacum, the Rhineland troops were defeated in their turn, and on Vitellius’ death soon afterward an accommodating Senate pronounced Vespasian emperor.

# The [Flavian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Flavian-dynasty) emperors

On Dec. 22, 69, the [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history) conferred all the imperial powers upon [Vespasian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vespasian) en bloc with the famous Lex de Imperio Vespasiani (“Law Regulating Vespasian’s authority”), and the Assembly ratified the Senate’s action. This apparently was the first time that such a law was passed; a fragmentary copy of it is preserved on the Capitol in [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome).

Vespasian (ruled 69–79) did not originate from Rome or its [aristocracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aristocracy). His [family](https://www.britannica.com/topic/family-kinship) came from the Sabine municipality Reate, and with his elevation the Italian [bourgeoisie](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bourgeoisie) came into its own. He and his two sons, both of whom in turn succeeded him, [constituted](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constituted) the [Flavian dynasty](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Flavian-dynasty) (69–96). Vespasian faced the same difficult task as Augustus—the restoration of peace and stability. The disorders of 69 had taken troops away from the Rhine and Danube frontiers. Thereupon, the Danubian lands were raided by [Sarmatians](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sarmatian), a combination of tribes who had overwhelmed and replaced the Scythians, their distant kinsmen, in eastern Europe. The assailants were repelled without undue difficulty; but the Sarmatian Iazyges, now firmly in control of the region between the Tisza and Danube rivers, posed a threat for the future.

Developments in the Rhineland were more immediately serious. There in 69 a certain [Civilis](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaius-Julius-Civilis) incited the [Batavians](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Batavi) serving as [auxiliaries](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/auxiliaries) in the Roman army to rebel. Gallic tribes joined the movement, and the insurgents boldly overran all but two of the legionary camps along the Rhine. Vespasian sent his relative [Petilius Cerealis](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Petilius-Cerealis) to deal with the rebels, who, fortunately for Rome, were not united in their aims; by 70 Cerealis had restored [order](https://www.britannica.com/technology/order-architecture). That same year Vespasian’s elder son, [Titus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Titus), brought the bloody war in Judaea to its end by besieging, capturing, and destroying Jerusalem.

To rehabilitate the public finances, Vespasian introduced new imposts, including a [poll tax](https://www.britannica.com/topic/poll-tax) on Jews, and practiced stringent economies. With the Senate he was courteous but firm. He allowed it little [initiative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/initiative) but used it as a reservoir from which to obtain capable administrators. To that end he assumed the censorship and added senators on a larger scale than Claudius had done, especially from the municipalities of [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy) and the western provinces. Already before 69 an aristocracy of service had arisen, and the provincialization of the Roman Senate had begun; thereafter this development made rapid headway. Besides the censorship, Vespasian also often held the consulship, usually with Titus as his colleague. His object presumably was to ensure that his own parvenu Flavian house outranked any other. In this he succeeded; the troops especially were ready to accept the Flavians as the new imperial family. On Vespasian’s death in 79, Titus, long groomed for the succession, became emperor and immediately had his father deified.

Titus (ruled 79–81) had a brief reign, marred by disasters (the volcanic eruption that buried [Pompeii](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pompeii) and [Herculaneum](https://www.britannica.com/place/Herculaneum) and another great fire in Rome); but his attempts to [alleviate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alleviate) the suffering and his general openhandedness won him such popularity that he was unhesitatingly deified after his early death.

[Domitian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Domitian) (ruled 81–96), Titus’ younger brother, had never been formally indicated for the succession; but the praetorians acclaimed him, and the Senate ratified their choice. Throughout his reign Domitian aimed at administrative [efficiency](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/efficiency), but his methods were high-handed. For him the Senate existed merely to supply imperial servants. He also used [equites](https://www.britannica.com/topic/eques) extensively, more than any previous emperor. He held the consulship repeatedly, was censor perpetuus from 85 on, and demanded other extravagant honours. On the whole, his efficiency promoted the welfare of the [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science). Above all, he retained the [allegiance](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/allegiance) of the troops. Although scornful of the Senate’s dignity, he insisted on his own and mercilessly punished any act of disrespect, real or fancied, toward himself. He became even more suspicious and ruthless when [Saturninus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Antonius-Saturninus), commander in Upper Germany, attempted rebellion in 89. He crushed Saturninus; executions and confiscations ensued, and delatores flourished. The [tyranny](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tyranny) was particularly dangerous to senators, and it ended only with Domitian’s assassination in 96. The Flavian [dynasty](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dynasty), like the Julio-Claudian, ended with an emperor whose memory was officially damned.

The disorders in 69 were the cause of some military reforms. Under the Flavians, auxiliaries usually served far from their native hearths under officers of different nationality from themselves. At the same time, the tasks assigned to them came increasingly to resemble those performed by the legionaries. The latter grew less mobile, as camps with stone buildings came to be the rule; and it became common for detachments from a [legion](https://www.britannica.com/topic/legion) (vexillationes), rather than the entire legion, to be used for field operations. This army of a new type proved its mettle in Britain, where the advance halted by [Boudicca’s](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Boudicca) revolt was now resumed. Between 71 and 84 three able governors—Petilius Cerealis, Julius Frontinus, and Julius [Agricola](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gnaeus-Julius-Agricola), the latter [Tacitus’](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tacitus-Roman-historian) father-in-law—enlarged the [province](https://www.britannica.com/topic/province-ancient-Roman-government) to include Wales and northern England; Agricola even reached the Scottish highlands before Domitian recalled him.

Along the Rhine, weaknesses revealed by Civilis’ revolt were repaired. Vespasian crossed the river in 74 and annexed the [Agri Decumates](https://www.britannica.com/place/Agri-Decumates), the triangle of land between the Rhine, Danube, and Main rivers. To consolidate the position, he and Domitian after him penetrated the [Neckar River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Neckar-River) valley and Taunus mountains, and fortifications began to take shape to the east of the Rhine, a military boundary complete with strongpoints, watchtowers, and, later, a continuous rampart of earthworks and palisades. Once Saturninus’ revolt in 89 had been suppressed, Domitian felt the situation along the Rhine sufficiently stable to warrant conversion of the military districts of Upper and Lower [Germany](https://www.britannica.com/place/Germany) into regular provinces and the transfer of some Rhineland troops to the Danube. To the north of this latter river, the [Dacians](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dacian) had been organized into a strong kingdom, ruled by [Decebalus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Decebalus) and centring on modern Romania; in 85 they raided southward across the Danube, and in the next year they defeated the Roman punitive expedition. Domitian restored the situation in 88, but Saturninus’ rebellion prevented him from following up his success. Domitian and Decebalus thereupon came to terms: Decebalus was to protect the lower Danube against Sarmatian attack, and Domitian was to pay him an annual subsidy in recompense. The Danubian frontier, however, remained disturbed, and Domitian wisely strengthened its garrisons; by the end of his reign it contained nine legions, as against the Rhineland’s six, and [Pannonia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pannonia) was soon to become the military [centre of gravity](https://www.britannica.com/science/centre-of-gravity) of the empire.

The Flavians also took measures to strengthen the eastern frontier. In [Asia Minor](https://www.britannica.com/place/Anatolia), Vespasian created a large “armed” province by amalgamating [Cappadocia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cappadocia), [Lesser Armenia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Little-Armenia), and Galatia; and the whole area was provided with a network of military roads. South of Asia Minor, Judaea was converted into an “armed” province by getting legionary troops; and two client kingdoms—Commagene and Transjordan—were annexed and added to [Syria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria). Furthermore, the legionary camps seem now to have been established right on the Euphrates at the principal river crossings. This display of military strength kept the empire and [Parthia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Parthia) at peace for many years.

## The early [Antonine emperors](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Five-Good-Emperors): [Nerva](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nerva-Roman-emperor) and [Trajan](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Trajan)

Marcus Cocceius Nerva, an elderly senator of some distinction, was the choice of Domitian’s assassins for emperor; and the Senate promptly recognized him. The soldiers, however, did so much more reluctantly, and, because the year 69 had revealed that emperors no longer needed to be Roman aristocrats and could be chosen in places other than Rome, their attitude imposed caution.

Nerva, who ruled from 96 to 98, adopted a generally lavish and liberal policy, but it failed to win the soldiers over completely, and he proved unable to save all Domitian’s murderers from their [vengeance](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vengeance). Unrest subsided only when, overlooking kinsmen of his own, he adopted an outstanding soldier, Marcus Ulpius Trajanus, who was governor of Upper Germany, as his successor. Nerva himself died a few months later.

Trajan (ruled 98–117) was the first and perhaps the only emperor to be adopted by a predecessor totally unrelated to him by either birth or marriage. He was also the first in a series of “good” rulers who succeeded one another by [adoption](https://www.britannica.com/topic/adoption-kinship) and for most of the 2nd century provided the empire with internal harmony and careful government; they are collectively, if somewhat loosely, called the [Antonine](https://www.britannica.com/event/Antonines) emperors. More significantly still, Trajan, a Spaniard, was also the first [princeps](https://www.britannica.com/topic/princeps) to come from the provinces; with the greater number of provincials now in the Senate, the elevation of one of them, sooner or later, was practically inevitable. Throughout his reign, Trajan generally observed [constitutional](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constitutional) practices. Mindful of the susceptibilities of the Senate, he regularly consulted and reported to it. Modest in his bearing, he did not claim [ostentatious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ostentatious) honours such as frequent consulships or numerous imperial salutations, and he mixed easily with senators on terms of cordial friendship. This reestablished mutual respect between princeps and Senate. Empire and liberty, in [Tacitus’](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tacitus-Roman-historian) words, were [reconciled](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reconciled), and the atmosphere of suspicion, intrigue, and terror surrounding the court in Domitian’s day disappeared. Trajan endeared himself also to the populace at large with lavish building programs, gladiatorial games, and public distributions of money. Above all, he was popular with the armed forces; he was the soldier-emperor par excellence. Understandably, he received the title Optimus (Best), officially from 114 on (and unofficially for many years earlier).

Yet Trajan was a thoroughgoing autocrat who intervened without hesitation or scruple even in the senatorial sphere, whenever it seemed necessary. His aim was efficiency; his desire was to promote public welfare everywhere. He embellished Rome with splendid and substantial structures, and he showed his care for Italy by refurbishing and enlarging the harbours at [Ostia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ostia), Centumcellae, and [Ancona](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ancona-Italy). He sent officials called curatores to Italian municipalities in financial difficulties and helped to rehabilitate them. He greatly expanded an ingenious charity scheme probably begun by Nerva: money was loaned to farmers on easy terms, and the low interest they paid went into a special fund for supporting [indigent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/indigent) children. Nor did Trajan neglect Italy’s highway network: he built a new road (Via Traiana) that soon replaced the [Via Appia](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Appian-Way) as the main thoroughfare between [Beneventum](https://www.britannica.com/place/Benevento-Italy) and Brundisium.

Interest in Italy implied no neglect of the provinces. Curatores were also sent to them; to rescue Achaea and [Bithynia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bithynia), senatorial provinces, from threatened bankruptcy, Trajan made them both temporarily imperial, sending special commissioners of his own to them. His correspondence with his appointee in Bithynia, the younger Pliny, has survived and reveals how conscientiously the emperor responded on even the smallest details. At the same time, it reveals how limited was access to the central government and, consequently, how great a latitude for independent decisions must be left to the governors who lacked some special claim on the emperor’s attention. Trajan’s day was too short to hear every speech of every delegation from the provinces, every recommendation to bestow favour or grant promotion, and every appeal to himself as supreme judiciary. To assist him, he had a “bureaucracy” of only a few hundred in Rome and a few more hundred serving in various capacities in the provinces—to direct the lives of some 60 million people. Clearly, most government must in fact rest in the hands of local [aristocracies](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aristocracies).

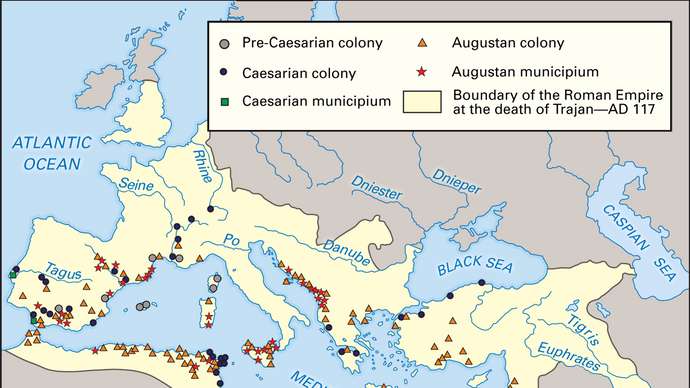
In the military sphere, Trajan’s reign proved a most [dynamic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dynamic) one. He decided to strengthen the dangerous Danube frontier by converting [Dacia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Dacia) into a [salient](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/salient) of Roman territory north of the river in order to dismember the Sarmatian tribes and remove the risk of large, hostile combinations to a safer distance. Bringing to bear a force of 100,000 men, he conquered [Decebalus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Decebalus) in two hard-fought wars (101–102; 105–106) and annexed Dacia, settling it with people from neighbouring parts of the empire. On the eastern frontier he planned a similar operation, evidently in the [conviction](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conviction), shared by many eminent Romans both before and after him, that only conquest could solve the Parthian problem. Possibly, too, he wished to contain the menace of the Sarmatian Alani in the Caspian region. In a preliminary move, the [Nabataean](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nabataean-people) kingdom of [Arabia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Arabia-Roman-province) Petraea was annexed in 105–106. Then, in 114, Trajan assembled another large army, incorporated the client kingdom of Armenia, and invaded Parthia.

After spectacular victories in 115 and 116, he created additional provinces (Northern Mesopotamia, [Assyria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Assyria)) and reached the [Persian Gulf](https://www.britannica.com/place/Persian-Gulf). But he had merely overrun Mesopotamia; he had not consolidated it, and, as his army passed, revolts broke out in its rear. The Jews of the [Diaspora](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Diaspora) and others seized their chance to rebel, and before the end of 116 much of the [Middle East](https://www.britannica.com/place/Middle-East) besides Parthia was in arms (Cyrene, [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt), Cyprus, Anatolia). Trajan proceeded resolutely to restore the situation, but death found him still in the East.

Before his last illness he had not formally indicated his successor. But high honours and important posts had been accorded his nearest male relative, [Publius Aelius Hadrianus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hadrian), the governor of Syria; and, according to Trajan’s widow, Hadrian had actually been adopted by Trajan on his deathbed. Accordingly, both Senate and soldiers recognized him. Trajan’s posthumous deification was never in doubt.

## Hadrian and the other Antonine emperors

Hadrian (ruled 117–138), also a Spaniard, was an emperor of unusual versatility. Unlike Trajan, he was opposed to territorial expansion. Being himself in the East in 117, he renounced Trajan’s conquests there immediately and contemplated evacuating Dacia as well. Furthermore, four of the consular generals particularly identified with Trajan’s military ventures were arrested and executed “for conspiracy”; Hadrian claimed later that the Senate ordered their deaths against his wishes. The only heavy fighting during his generally peaceful reign occurred in Judaea—or [Syria Palaestina](https://www.britannica.com/place/Palestine), as it was thenceforth called—where [Bar Kokhba](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bar-Kokhba-Jewish-leader) led a furious, if [futile](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/futile), Jewish revolt (132–135) against Hadrian’s conversion of Jerusalem into a Roman colony named [Aelia Capitolina](https://www.britannica.com/place/Aelia-Capitolina).

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/43/1043-050-CA993CCB/extent-Roman-Empire-117-ce.jpg)

[**Roman Empire**](https://cdn.britannica.com/43/1043-050-CA993CCB/extent-Roman-Empire-117-ce.jpg)

The extent of the Roman Empire in 117 CE.

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Instead of expansion by war, Hadrian sought carefully delimited but well-defended frontiers, with client states beyond them where possible. The frontiers themselves, when not natural barriers, were strongly fortified: in Britain, [Hadrian’s Wall](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hadrians-Wall), a complex of ditches, mounds, forts, and stone wall, stretched across the island from the Tyne to the Solway; Germany and [Raetia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Raetia) had a limes (fortified boundary) running between Mainz on the Rhine and Regensburg on the Danube. Within the frontiers the army was kept at full strength, mostly by local recruiting of legionaries and apparently of auxiliaries, too (so that Vespasian’s system of having the latter serve far from their homelands gradually ceased). Moreover, the tendency for auxiliaries to be [assimilated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/assimilated) to legionaries continued; even the officers became less distinguishable, because equites now sometimes replaced senators in high posts in the legions. To keep his essentially sedentary army in constant readiness and at peak efficiency (no easy task), Hadrian carried out frequent personal inspections, spending about half his reign in the provinces (121–125; 128–134).

Hadrian also was responsible for significant developments on the civilian side. Under him, equites were no longer required to do military service as an essential step in their career, and many of them were employed in the imperial [civil service](https://www.britannica.com/topic/civil-service), more even than under Domitian. By now the formative days of the civil service were over; its [bureaucratic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bureaucratic) phase was beginning, and it offered those equites who had no military [aspirations](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aspirations) an attractive, purely civilian career. Formal titles now marked the different equestrian grades of dignity: a procurator was vir egregius; an ordinary [prefect](https://www.britannica.com/topic/prefect-ancient-Roman-official), vir perfectissimus; a praetorian prefect, vir eminentissimus, the latter title being obviously parallel to the [designation](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/designation) vir clarissimus for a senator. Thenceforth, equites replaced freedmen in the imperial household and bureaus, and they even appeared in Hadrian’s imperial council.

Hadrian also improved legal administration. He had his expert jurists codify the edictum perpetuum (the set of rules gradually elaborated by the praetors for the interpretation of the law). He also appointed four former consuls to serve as circuit judges in Italy. This brought Italy close to becoming a province; Hadrian’s intent, however, was not to reduce the status of Italy but to make all parts of the empire important. For one part of his realm, he was exceptionally solicitous: he spent much time in Greece and lavishly embellished Athens.

Hadrian maintained good relations with but was never fully trusted by the Senate. His [foreign policy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/foreign-policy) seemed to be unheroic, his cosmopolitanism to be un-Roman, and his reforms to [encroach](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/encroach) on activities traditionally reserved for senators. Moreover, in his last two years he was sometimes [capricious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/capricious) and tyrannous. Like [Augustus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-Roman-emperor), he had no son of his own and conducted a frustrating search for a successor. After executing his only male blood relative, his grandnephew, in 136, he adopted [Lucius Ceionius Commodus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucius-Verus), renaming him [Lucius Aelius Caesar](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucius-Aelius-Caesar). The latter, however, died shortly afterward, whereupon Hadrian in 138 chose a wealthy but sonless senator, the 51-year-old Titus Aurelius Antoninus; but, evidently intent on founding a dynasty, he made Antoninus in his turn adopt two youths, 16 and 7 years old, respectively—they are known to history as Marcus Aurelius (the nephew of Antoninus’ wife) and Lucius Verus (the son of Aelius Caesar). When Hadrian died soon thereafter, Antoninus succeeded and induced a reluctant Senate to deify the deceased emperor. According to some, it was this act of filial piety that won for Antoninus his cognomen, Pius.

[Antoninus Pius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Antoninus-Pius) (ruled 138–161) epitomizes the Roman Empire at its [cosmopolitan](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cosmopolitan) best. He himself was of Gallic origin; his wife was of Spanish origin. For most men his was a reign of quiet prosperity, and the empire under him deserves the praises lavished upon it by the contemporary writer [Aelius Aristides](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aelius-Aristides). Unlike Hadrian, Antoninus traveled little; he remained in Italy, where in 148 he celebrated the 900th anniversary of Rome. Princeps and Senate were on excellent terms, and coins with the words tranquillitas and concordia on them in Antoninus’ case mean what they say. Other of his coins not unreasonably proclaim felicitas temporum (“the happiness of the times”). Yet raids and rebellions in many of the borderlands (in Britain, Dacia, Mauretania, Egypt, Palaestina, and elsewhere) were danger symptoms, even though to the empire at large they seemed only faraway bad dreams, to use the expression of Aelius Aristides. Antoninus prudently pushed the Hadrianic frontiers forward in Dacia, the Rhineland, and Britain (where the [Antonine Wall](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Antonine-Wall) from the Firth of Forth to the [River Clyde](https://www.britannica.com/place/River-Clyde) became the new boundary) and carefully groomed his heir apparent for his imperial responsibilities.

[Marcus Aurelius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Aurelius-Roman-emperor) (ruled 161–180) succeeded the deified Antoninus and more than honoured Hadrian’s intentions by immediately co-opting Lucius Verus as his full co-emperor. Because Verus’ competence was unproved, this excess of zeal was imprudent. Fortunately, Verus left [decision making](https://www.britannica.com/topic/decision-making) to Marcus. Marcus’ action was also dangerous for another reason; it represented a long step away from imperial unity and portended the ultimate division of the empire into Greek- and Latin-speaking halves. Nor was this the only foreboding development in Marcus’ reign—formidable barbarian assaults were launched against the frontiers, anticipating those that were later to bring about the disintegration of the empire. Marcus himself was a [stoic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stoic) philosopher; his humanistic, if somewhat pessimistic, [*Meditations*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Meditations-by-Marcus-Aurelius) reveal how conscientiously he took his duties. Duty called him to war; he responded to the call and spent far more of his reign in the field than had any previous emperor.

At Marcus’ very accession the Parthians turned aggressive, and he sent Verus to defend Roman interests (162). Verus greedily took credit for any victories but left serious fighting to [Avidius Cassius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaius-Avidius-Cassius) and the army of Syria. Cassius succeeded in overrunning Mesopotamia and even took [Ctesiphon](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ctesiphon-ancient-city-Iraq), the Parthian capital; he was therefore able to conclude a peace that safeguarded Rome’s eastern provinces and client kingdoms (166). In the process, however, his troops became infected with plague, and they carried it back with them to the west with calamitous results. The Danube frontier, already weakened by the dispatch of large detachments to the East, collapsed under [barbarian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/barbarian-invasions) assault. Pressed on from behind by Goths, Vandals, Lombards, and others, the Germanic Marcomanni and Quadi and the Sarmatian Iazyges poured over the river; the Germans actually crossed Raetia, [Noricum](https://www.britannica.com/place/Noricum), and Pannonia to raid northern Italy and besiege [Aquileia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Aquileia). Marcus and Verus relieved the city shortly before Verus’ death (169). Then, making Pannonia his pivot of maneuver, Marcus pushed the invaders back; by 175 they were again beyond the Danube. At that moment, however, a false report of Marcus’ death prompted Avidius Cassius, by now in charge of all eastern provinces, to proclaim himself emperor. The news of this challenge undid Marcus’ achievements along the Danube because it took him to the East and reopened the door to barbarian attacks. Fortunately, Cassius was soon murdered, and Marcus could return to central Europe (177). But he had barely restored the frontier again when he died at Vindobona (Vienna) in 180, [bequeathing](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bequeathing) the empire to his son, the 19-year-old [Commodus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Commodus), who had actually been named coemperor three years earlier.

Commodus (ruled 180–192), like Gaius and Nero, the youthful emperors before him, proved incompetent, conceited, and capricious. Fortunately, the frontiers remained intact, thanks to able provincial governors and to barbarian allies, who had been settled along the Danube with land grants and who gave military service in return. But Commodus abandoned Marcus’ scheme for new trans-Danubian provinces, preferring to devote himself to sensual pleasures and especially to the excitements of the arena in Rome, where he posed as Hercules Romanus and forced the Senate to recognize his godhead officially. He left serious business to his favourites, whose ambitions and intrigues led to plots, treason trials, confiscations, and insensate murders. Commodus’ assassination on the last day of 192 terminated a disastrous reign; thus the Antonines, like the Julio-Claudians, had come to an [ignominious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ignominious) end. And there was a similar sequel. Commodus’ damnatio memoriae, like Nero’s, was followed by a year of four emperors.

# The empire in the 2nd century

The century and three-quarters after [Augustus’](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-Roman-emperor) death brought no fundamental changes to the principate, although so long a lapse of time naturally introduced modifications and shifts of emphasis. By Flavian and Antonine times the principate was accepted universally. For the provinces, a return to the republic was utterly unthinkable; for [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome) and [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy), the year 69 served as a grim warning of the [chaos](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/chaos) to be expected if, in the absence of a [princeps](https://www.britannica.com/topic/princeps), the ambitions of a few powerful individuals obtained unfettered scope. A princeps was clearly a necessity, and people were even prepared to tolerate a bad one, although naturally they always hoped for a good one.

The princeps, moreover, did not have to be chosen any longer from the Julio-Claudians. The great achievement of the Flavians was to [reconcile](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reconcile) the soldiers and the upper classes everywhere to the idea that others were eligible. The Flavians’ frequent [tenure](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tenure) of consulship and censorship invested their [family](https://www.britannica.com/topic/family-kinship), though not of the highest nobility, with the outward trappings of [prestige](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prestige) and the aristocratic appearance of an authentic imperial household. The deification of the first two Flavians contributed to the same end, and so did the disappearance of old republican families that might have outranked the reigning house (by 69 most descendants of the republican nobility had either died of natural causes or been exterminated by imperial persecution). After the Flavians, the newness of a man’s senatorial dignity and the obscurity of his ultimate origin, whether it was Italian or otherwise, no longer forbade his possible elevation. Indeed, [Domitian’s](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Domitian) successors and even Domitian himself in his last years did not need to [enhance](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enhance) their own importance by repeated consulships. The Antonine emperors, like the Julio-Claudians, held the office infrequently. They did, however, continue the Flavian practice of emphasizing the loftiness of their families by [deifying](https://www.britannica.com/topic/deification) deceased relatives (Trajan deified his sister, his niece, and his father; Antoninus, his wife; and so forth).

## Trend to absolute monarchy

Glorification of the reigning house, together with a document such as [Vespasian’s](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vespasian) Lex de Imperio, helped to advertise the emperor’s position; and under the Flavians and Antonines the principate became much more like an avowed monarchy. Proconsular imperium began to be reflected in the imperial titulary, and official documents started calling the emperor dominus noster (“our master”).

The development of imperial law-making clearly illustrates the change. From the beginnings of the principate, the emperor had had the power to legislate, although no law is known that formally recognized his right to do so; by Antonine times, legal textbooks stated unequivocally that whatever the emperor ordered was legally binding. The early emperors usually made the [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history) their mouthpiece and issued their laws in the form of senatorial decrees; by the 2nd century the emperor was openly replacing whatever other sources of written law had hitherto been permitted to function. After 100 the Assembly never met formally to pass a law, and the Senate often no longer bothered to couch its decrees in legal [language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/language), being content to repeat [verbatim](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/verbatim) the speech with which the ruler had advocated the measure in question. After [Hadrian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hadrian), magistrates ceased modifying existing law by their legal interpretations because the praetors’ edictum perpetuum had become a permanent code, which the emperor alone could alter. By 200, learned jurists had lost the right they had enjoyed since the time of Augustus of giving [authoritative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/authoritative) rulings on disputed points ([*responsa prudentium*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/responsa-prudentium)). Meanwhile, the emperor more and more was legislating directly by means of edicts, judgments, [mandates](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mandates), and rescripts—collectively known as [*constitutiones principum*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/constitutiones-principum). He usually issued such constitutiones only after consulting the “friends” (amici Caesaris) who composed his imperial council. But a constitutio was nevertheless a fiat. The road to the later dominate (after 284) lay open.

## [Political life](https://www.britannica.com/topic/government)

Nevertheless, the autocratic aspect of the Flavian and Antonine regimes should not be overstressed. Augustus himself had been well aware that it was impossible to disguise permanently the supremacy that accumulation of powers gained piecemeal conferred; his deportment in his last years differed little from that of Vespasian, [Titus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Titus), and the so-called five good emperors who followed them. Nor had other Julio-Claudians hesitated to parade their predominance—Claudius, by centralizing the imperial powers, reduced their apparent [diversity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/diversity) to one all-embracing imperium; Gaius and Nero revealed the autocracy [implicit](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/implicit) in the principate with frank brutality.

What impresses perhaps as much as the undoubtedly autocratic behaviour of the Flavians and Antonines is the markedly civilian character of their reigns. They held supreme power, and some of them were distinguished soldiers; yet they were not military [despots](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/despots). For this the old republican tradition—whereby a state official might serve in both a civilian and a military capacity—was largely responsible. Matters, however, were open to change after Hadrian separated the two realms of service. Actually, the 3rd century soon showed what it meant to have a princeps whose whole experience had been confined to camps and barracks.

As imperial powers became more concentrated, republican institutions decayed; the importance of imperial officials grew, while the authority of urban magistrates declined. Quaestorship, praetorship, and consulship (the last-named now reduced to a two-month sinecure) became mere stepping stones to the great imperial posts that counted most in the life of the [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science). Governors of imperial provinces and commanders of legions were Roman senators; but they were equally imperial appointees. Clearly, the emperor was the master of the Senate; and it was [disingenuous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disingenuous) for him to get impatient, as some emperors did, with the Senate’s lack of [initiative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/initiative) and reluctance to take firm decisions of its own. The emperor might not even consult the Senate much, preferring to rely on his imperial council, in which equestrian bureau chiefs over the course of the 2nd century came to [constitute](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constitute) an established element.

The Senate, however, at least until the reign of [Commodus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Commodus), was treated courteously by most Flavians and Antonines. They recognized its importance as a lawcourt, as the body that formally appointed a new emperor, and as a sounding board of informed opinion. Senators came increasingly from the provinces, and, although this meant preeminently the western provinces (the Greek-speaking East being underrepresented), the Senate did reflect to some extent the views of the empire at large.

The [equites](https://www.britannica.com/topic/eques), meanwhile, steadily acquired greater importance as imperial officials. In newly created posts they invariably became the incumbents, and in posts of long standing they replaced freedmen and publicani. During the 2nd century equestrian procurators increased markedly in numbers as the direction of imperial business came to be more tidily subdivided. Four grades of service distinguished by salary were established. While the government assumed a more rational flow and outline, its total number of employees nevertheless remained quite tiny, compared with that of the 4th and later centuries.

## Rome and Italy

By the 2nd century the [city](https://www.britannica.com/topic/city) of Rome had attracted freeborn migrants from all over the empire; it housed, additionally, large numbers of manumitted slaves. These newcomers were all [assimilated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/assimilated) and diluted the city’s Italian flavour. The vast majority of them were poor, the handful of opulent imperial freedmen being entirely exceptional. But many were energetic, enterprising, and lucky, able to make their way in the world. Freedmen laboured under a social stigma, although some of them managed to become equites. Their sons, however, might overcome [discrimination](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discrimination), and their grandsons were even eligible for membership in the Senate.

Inevitably, there was extensive trade and commerce (much of it in [freedman](https://www.britannica.com/topic/freedman) hands) in so large a city, which was also the centre of imperial administration. There was little industry, however, and the [urban](https://www.britannica.com/topic/urbanization) poor had difficulty finding steady employment. Theirs was a precarious existence, dependent on the public grain dole and on the private charity of the wealthy. Large building programs gave Flavian and Antonine emperors the opportunity not only to repair the damage caused by fire and falling buildings (as stated, a frequent hazard among the densely packed and flimsily built accommodations for the urban plebs) but also to relieve widespread urban unemployment. They also made imperial Rome a city of grandeur. Augustus’ building program had been vast but mostly concerned with repairing or rebuilding structures already existing, and his Julio-Claudian successors had built relatively little until the great fire made room for the megalomaniac marvels of Nero’s last years. It was under the Flavians and Antonines that Rome obtained many of its most celebrated structures: the [Colosseum](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Colosseum), Palatine palaces, [Trajan’s Forum](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Trajans-Forum), the [Pantheon](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pantheon-building-Rome-Italy), the [Castel](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Castel-SantAngelo) Sant’ Angelo (Hadrian’s mausoleum), the Temple of Antoninus and Faustina, Aurelius’ Column, as well as the aqueducts whose arches spanned across Campagna to keep the city and its innumerable fountains supplied with water.

Italy was much less [cosmopolitan](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cosmopolitan) and sophisticated and, according to literary tradition, much more sober and straitlaced than was Rome. It was the mistress of the empire, although the gap between it and the provinces was narrowing. Hadrian’s policies especially helped to reduce its privileged position. His use of circuit judges was resented precisely because with them Italy resembled a province; actually, Italy badly needed them, and their abolition by [Antoninus Pius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Antoninus-Pius) was soon reversed by [Marcus Aurelius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Aurelius-Roman-emperor). Also, in Aurelius’ reign a provincial fate overtook Italy in the form of [barbarian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/barbarian) invasion; a few years later the country got its first legionary garrison under [Septimius Severus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Septimius-Severus).

The economic importance of Italy also declined. By the end of Augustus’ reign, the ascendancy of its wine, oil, [marble](https://www.britannica.com/science/marble-rock), and fine pottery in the markets of [Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe) and [Germany](https://www.britannica.com/place/Germany) had already begun to yield to the competition of local production in the West; and, by Flavian times, Italy was actually importing heavily not only from Gaul (witness the crates of yet-unpacked Gallic bowls and plates caught in the destruction of Pompeii) but also from Spain. The latter [province](https://www.britannica.com/topic/province-ancient-Roman-government) was especially represented by its extraordinarily popular condiment, garum; its [olive oil](https://www.britannica.com/topic/olive-oil), too, was a sizable item on Italian tables after AD 100, only to yield its primacy there, by the mid-2nd century, to oil from northern Africa. By then, Spanish, Gallic, and African farm products all outweighed Italian ones in [Ostia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ostia) and Rome. Against such tendencies, the emperors did what they could: Domitian, for example, protected Italian [viticulture](https://www.britannica.com/science/viticulture) by restricting vine growing in the provinces; Trajan and his successors forced Roman senators to take an interest in the country, even though it was no longer the homeland of many of them, by investing a high proportion of their capital in Italian land (one-third under Trajan, one-quarter under Aurelius).

## Developments in the provinces

The 18th-century historian [Edward Gibbon’s](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Edward-Gibbon) famous description of the 2nd century as the period when men were happiest and most prosperous is not entirely false. Certainly, by then people had come to take for granted the unique greatness and invincibility of the empire; even the ominous events of Aurelius’ reign failed to shatter their [conviction](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conviction) that the empire was impregnable; and the internal disturbances of the preceding reign had not given cause for much alarm. The credit for the empire’s success lay less with what its rulers did and could do than with what they did not do: they did not interfere too much. The empire was a vast congeries of peoples and races with differing religions, customs, and languages, and the emperors were content to let them live their own lives. Imperial policy favoured a veneer of common [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture) [transcending](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transcending) ethnic differences, but there was no deliberate denationalization. Ambitious men striving for a career naturally found it helpful, if not necessary, to become Roman in bearing and conduct and perhaps even in language as well (although speakers of Greek often rose to exalted positions). But local self-government was the general rule, and neither Latin nor Roman ways were imposed on the [communities](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/communities) composing the empire. The official attitude to religion illustrates this—in line with the absolutist trend, emperor worship was becoming slowly but progressively more theocratic (Domitian relished the title of god, Commodus demanded it); yet this did not lead to the suppression of non-Roman or even outlandish cults, unless they were thought immoral (like Druidism, with its human sacrifice) or [conducive](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conducive) to public disorder (like Christianity, with its uncompromising dismissal of all gods other than its own as mere demons, and wicked and hurtful ones at that—hence its liability to become a target for riots).

While there is no indication that the central authorities consciously opposed the increase of governmental personnel, the number of government employees certainly grew very slowly. Thus the responsibilities of the magnates in provincial cities were correspondingly great. In parts of southern Spain or in the area south of the [Black Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Black-Sea), for example, where the extent of the territories dependent on cities stretched out over many scores of miles into the surrounding landscape, city senators had not only to collect taxes but also to build roads and carry out much rural police work. Within their cities, too, senators had to see to the collection of taxes and tolls; as a group, they had to oversee and assign the income from municipal lands or buildings rented out and from endowments established by generous citizens; they had to authorize the plans and financing of sometimes very elaborate civic structures—an [aqueduct](https://www.britannica.com/technology/aqueduct-engineering), an [amphitheatre](https://www.britannica.com/technology/amphitheater), or a temple to the imperial family—or of great annual festivals and fairs or of ongoing amenities serving the public baths (free oil for anointing oneself, heating, and upkeep) or the public markets. In the eastern provinces, they had to replenish from time to time the stock of small local [bronze](https://www.britannica.com/technology/bronze-alloy) coins; and they had to insure that magistracies were effectively staffed, even though there usually was no salary of any sort to attract candidates. [Magistrates](https://www.britannica.com/topic/magistrate-law) and city senators generally had to pay handsomely for their election and thereafter make further handsome contributions, as need arose and so far as they could afford, toward the adornment of their [community](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community).

What attracted candidates in adequate numbers were most often three inducements: the feeling of community approval and praise, offered in the most public ways (described by writers of the time with striking psychological penetration); the enhancement of personal influence (meaning power) through the demonstration of great financial means; and finally, the social and political advancement that might follow on local prominence through attracting the attention of a governor or of the emperor himself. It was from the provincial elite that new Roman senators were made.

Cities, through their elite families, competed with each other across entire regions. City rivalries in northern Italy or western Anatolia happen to be especially well reported. Within individual cities, elite families were often in competition as well. In consequence, the standards of municipal beneficence rose, encouraged by a populace who on public occasions assembled in large numbers in the theatre, demanding yet more expenditure from their leaders. The emperors, who realized that the well-being of cities, the jewels of their realm, depended on such munificence, increasingly intervened to insure a continued flow of good things from the rich of a community to their fellow citizens. Legislation might, for example, specify the binding nature of electoral campaign promises or of formerly voluntary contributions connected with public service. As a consequence, in the 2nd century consideration must for the first time be given to the local aristocrat unwilling to serve his city; the series of imperial pronouncements exerting compulsion on such a person to serve was to stretch far into the future, with increasing severity. Attempts to stabilize the benefits arising from ambitious rivalries thus had an oppressive aspect.

As to the lower orders, their voice is rarely heard in surviving sources, except in acclamation. So long as the rich voluntarily covered the bulk of local expenses and so long as they commanded the leisure and knowledge of the world to give to administration unsalaried, the poor could not fairly claim much of a right to determine the city’s choices. Thus they acclaimed the candidacies of the rich and their gifts and otherwise gave vent to their wishes only by shouting in unison in the theatre or amphitheatre (in between spectacles) or through violent mob actions.

As noted above, the poor routinely solved the problems of daily life by appealing to someone of influence locally; this was true whether in Palestine, as indicated in the Talmud, or in Italy, as is evident from Pliny’s correspondence. The higher one looked in society, the more it appeared crisscrossed and interconnected by ties of [kinship](https://www.britannica.com/topic/kinship) or of past services exchanged. It was at these higher levels that answers to routine problems were to be sought. Appeal was not directed to one’s peers, even though trade associations, cult groups of social equals, and burial insurance clubs with monthly meetings could be found in every town. Such groups served [social](https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-class), not political or economic, purposes, at least during the principate.

Accordingly, society was ordinarily described by contemporaries simply in terms of two classes, the upper and the lower, rich and poor, powerful and dependent, well known and nameless. The upper classes consisted of little more than 600 Roman senators, 25,000 equites, and 100,000 city senators; hence, a total amounting to 2 percent of the population. This stratum, from the mid-2nd century defined in law as “the more honourable,” honestiores, was minutely subdivided into degrees of dignity, the degrees being well advertised and jealously asserted; the entire stratum, however, was entitled to receive specially tender treatment in the courts. The remaining population was lumped together as “the more lowly,” humiliores, subject to [torture](https://www.britannica.com/topic/torture) when giving witness in court; to beatings, not fines; and to execution (in increasingly savage forms of death) rather than exile for the most serious crimes. Yet because of the existing patterns of power, which directed the humiliores to turn for help to the upper stratum, the lower classes did not form a revolutionary mass but [constituted](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constituted) a stable element.

The pyramidal structure of society suggested by the statistics given above is somewhat obscured by the reality and prominence of the urban scene. In the cities the harsh outlines of the distribution of wealth were moderated by a certain degree of [social mobility](https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-mobility). No class offers more success stories than that of freedmen. Especially in the West, freedmen are astonishingly prominent in the record of inscriptions and proverbial for what the upper classes called unprincipled enterprise and vulgar moneygrubbing. Artisans and tradespeople—lowly folk, in the eyes of someone like Cicero—in fact presented themselves with a certain dignity, even some financial ease. At the bottom, slaves were numerous, [constituting](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constituting) perhaps one-tenth of the population in at least the larger towns outside of Italy and considerably more in Italy—as much as one-quarter in Rome. But in the cities many of them at least enjoyed security from starvation and had a good roof over their heads. When one turns to the rural scene, however, one encounters a far larger, harsher world. In the first place, nine-tenths of the empire’s people lived on the land and from its yield. Where details of their lives emerge with any clarity, they most often tell of a changeless and bleak existence. The city looked down on the countryside with elaborate scorn, keeping the rural population at arm’s length. Very often people in the country had their own language—such as Gallic, Syriac, Libyphoenician, or Coptic, which further isolated them—and their own religion, marriage customs, and forms of entertainment. In time, the very term “country dweller,” paganus, set the rural population still further apart from the empire’s Christianized urban population.

# The creation of a unified civilization

In the overall [context](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/context) of Western history, the degree to which the Mediterranean world during the period of the [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science) became one single system, one civilization, is a matter of the greatest importance. Clearly, one must distinguish between the life of the rural masses and that of the urban minority. The former retained many traits of a way of life predating not only Roman conquest but, in the East, the conquests of [Alexander the Great](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alexander-the-Great) centuries earlier. However, the device of organizing conquered territories under cities responsible for their surrounding territory proved as successful under the Romans as under the Greeks. The intent of both conquerors may have been limited to ensuring political control and the yield of tribute; however, in fact, they achieved much more: an approach to uniformity, at least in the cities.

## [Urban centres](https://www.britannica.com/topic/urban-planning)

The first thing to strike the traveler’s eye, in any survey of the 2nd-century empire, would have been the physical appearance of urban centres; as already noted, whatever the [province](https://www.britannica.com/topic/province-ancient-Roman-government), many of the same architectural forms could be observed: the suburbs tended to have aqueducts and racetracks and the cities a central grand [market](https://www.britannica.com/topic/market) area surrounded by porticoes, temples, a records office, a council hall, a basilica for judicial hearings and public auctions, and a covered market hall of a characteristic shape for perishable foods (a macellum, as in [Pompeii](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pompeii), in Perge on the southern coast of modern Turkey, or in North African Lepcis); there also would have been public baths with several separate halls for cold or hot bathing or exercise, a covered or open-air theatre, grand fountains, monumental arches, and honorific statues of local worthies by the dozens or even hundreds. Eastern centres would have gymnasia, occasionally Western ones as well; and Western cities would have amphitheatres, occasionally Eastern ones as well, for the imported institution of gladiatorial combats. Throughout the Western provinces, public buildings were likely to be arranged according to a single plan—more or less the same everywhere—in which a grid of right-angle streets was dominant, at least toward the central part of the city.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/47/1047-050-7CDA5628/room-baths-Ger-Trier.jpg)

[**Roman imperial baths**](https://cdn.britannica.com/47/1047-050-7CDA5628/room-baths-Ger-Trier.jpg)

The hot room of the imperial baths at Trier, Germany.

Fototeca Unione

In the West, as opposed to the East, a great deal of urbanization remained to be done and was accomplished by the Romans. The grid plan, its particular mark, can be detected at the heart of places such as Turin, Banasa (Morocco), and Autun, all Augustan foundations, as well as in Nicopolis (Bulgaria), Budapest, and Silchester, all later ones. As noted above, [orthogonal](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/orthogonal) [town planning](https://www.britannica.com/topic/urban-planning) was not a Roman invention, but the Romans introduced it to new regions and with a particular regularity of their own. Moreover, the grid of the central part of the city was matched, and sometimes extended on the same lines, by another grid laid across the surrounding territory. The process, referred to as centuriation, typically made use of squares of 2,330 feet (710 metres) on a side, intended for land distribution to settlers and general purposes of inventory. Signs of it were first detected in northern Africa in the 1830s, through surviving crop marks and roads, and have since (especially through air photography) been traced in the environs of Trier and Homs (Syria) and large areas of northern [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy), [Tunisia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Tunisia), and elsewhere. In the placing of cities and roads and property boundaries, the Romans of the empire therefore left a nearly indelible stamp of their organizing energies on the map of Europe; they also established the lives of conquered populations inside their own characteristic framework.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/46/1046-050-F23D2EA3/Roman-city-ad-Algeria-Thamugadi-Trajan.jpg)

[**ancient Roman city of Thamugadi**](https://cdn.britannica.com/46/1046-050-F23D2EA3/Roman-city-ad-Algeria-Thamugadi-Trajan.jpg)

The ancient Roman city of Thamugadi in northeastern Algeria, founded by Trajan in AD 100.

Fototeca Unione

## [Latinization](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Latin-language)

The special burst of energy in the Augustan colonizing spread abroad not only the visible elements of a ruling civilization but the invisible ones as well. Colonies and municipalities received Roman forms of government according to their charters, they were administered by [Roman law](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-law) in Latin, and they diffused these things throughout the general population within and around them. In frontier areas such lessons in an alien civilization were pressed home by garrison forces through their frequent contacts with their hosts and suppliers. By the 2nd century considerable Latinization had occurred in the West. Modern Spanish, Portuguese, and French show that this was particularly true of the Iberian peninsula, which had been provincial soil ever since the [Second Punic War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Second-Punic-War), and of [Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe), where Latin enjoyed the advantage of some relationship to Celtic. In these regions, except in the less accessible rural or mountainous parts, even the lower orders adopted Latin. Today one can find in Romania the tongue that is the closest to its parent, Latin, even at so great a distance from its home. And Latin can be found not only in Romance languages; it has left its mark on languages such as Basque and German.

Inscriptions represent the most frequent testimony to linguistic allegiance; more than a quarter of a million survive in Latin from the period of the empire, the vast majority of them being [funerary](https://www.britannica.com/topic/death-rite). The number of inscriptions per year increases slowly during the 1st century and a half AD, thereafter ascending in a steep line to a point in the second decade of the 3rd and then falling off even more steeply. The curve is best explained as reflecting pride in “Romanness”—in possessing not only Latin but full citizenship as well and, thereby, admission to a group for whom commemoration of the deceased was a legal as well as a [moral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moral) duty. Over the course of time, by individual gift from the emperors, by army service, and by election to magistracies or simply to the city senates of colonies and municipalities, a growing proportion of the empire’s population had gained citizenship; moreover, their children were citizens, whose descendants in turn were Romans in the legal sense. By AD 212 this accelerating process had advanced so far that the emperor [Caracalla](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Caracalla) could offer the gift of incorporation to the entirety of his subjects without much notice being taken of his generosity—it was already in the possession of most of the people who counted and whose reactions might be recorded. Once citizenship was universal, it ceased to [constitute](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/constitute) a distinction; thus the declaration of it through the custom of funerary commemoration rapidly passed out of favour.

## Limits of unification

One great flaw in the picture of the empire as one single civilization by 212, triumphantly unified in [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture) as in its political form, has already been pointed out: what was achieved within the cities’ walls did not extend with any completeness to the rural population, among whom local ways and native languages persisted. Peasants in 4th-century [Syria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria) spoke mostly Syriac, in [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt) mostly Coptic, in Africa often Punic or Libyphoenician, and in the Danube and northwestern provinces other native tongues. There was still another great flaw: the empire was half Roman (or Latin), half [Greek](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Greek-language). The latter was hardly touched by the former except through what may be called official channels—that is, law, coinage, military presence, imperial cult, and the superposition of an alien structure of power and [prestige](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prestige), to which the elite of the Eastern provinces might aspire. On the other hand, the Roman half was steeped in Greek ways. Apuleius, for example, though born and reared in a small North African town of the 2nd century, was sent to Athens to study rhetoric; on his return he could find not only an audience for his presentations in Greek but ordinary people in the marketplace able to read a letter in that [language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/language). In [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome) the Christian [community](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community) used Greek as its liturgical language well into the 3rd century, and the crowds in the [Circus Maximus](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Circus-Maximus) could enjoy a pun in Greek; an aristocrat such as the emperor [Marcus Aurelius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Aurelius-Roman-emperor) could be expected to be as bilingual as was Cicero or Caesar before him or even, like the emperor [Gallienus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gallienus), help the Greek philosopher Plotinus found a sort of Institute for Advanced Studies in the Naples area. Greece continued to supply a great deal of sculpture for Western buyers or even the teams of artisans needed for the decoration of public buildings in 3rd-century northern Africa. By such various means the division between the two halves of the empire was for a time covered over.

# Cult of the [emperors](https://www.britannica.com/topic/emperor-title)

Among the institutions most important in softening the edges of regional differences was the cult of the emperors. In one sense, it originated in the 4th century BC, when [Alexander the Great](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alexander-the-Great) first received veneration by titles and symbols and forms of address as if he were a [superhuman](https://www.britannica.com/topic/deification) being. Indeed, he must have seemed exactly that to contemporaries in [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt), where the pharaohs had long been worshiped, and to peoples in the [Middle East](https://www.britannica.com/place/Middle-East), for similar reasons of religious custom. Even the Greeks were quite used to the idea that beings who lived a human life of extraordinary accomplishment, as “heroes” in the full sense of the Greek word, would never die but be raised into some higher world; they believed this of heroes such as Achilles, Hercules, Pythagoras, and Dion of [Syracuse](https://www.britannica.com/place/Syracuse-Italy) in the mid-4th century BC. Great Roman commanders, like Hellenistic rulers, had altars, festivals, and special honours voted to them by Greek cities from the start of the 2nd century BC. It was not so strange, then, that a [freedman](https://www.britannica.com/topic/freedman) supporter of [Caesar’s](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julius-Caesar-Roman-ruler) erected a pillar over the ashes of the dead [dictator](https://www.britannica.com/topic/dictator-Roman-official) in the Forum in April 44 BC and offered cult to him as a being now resident among the gods. Many citizens joined in. Within days Caesar’s heir Octavian pressed for the declaration of Caesar as divine—which the [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history) granted by its vote in 42. By 25 BC the city of Mytilene had organized annual cult acts honouring [Augustus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-Roman-emperor) and communicated their forms and impulse to Tarraco in Spain as well as to other Eastern Greek cities; and by 12 BC divine honours to Caesar and Augustus’ genius were established through the emperors’ [initiative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/initiative) both in the Gallic capital, Lugdunum, and in the neighbourhood chapels to the crossroads gods in [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome). From these various points and models, emperor worship spread rapidly. Within a few generations, cities everywhere had built in its service new temples that dominated their forums or had assigned old temples to the joint service of a prior god and the imperial [family](https://www.britannica.com/topic/family-kinship). Such centres served as rallying points for the citizenry to express its devotion to Rome and the emperor. To speak for whole provinces, priests of the cult assembled during their year of office in central shrines, such as Lugdunum, as delegates of their cities, where they formulated for the emperor their complaints or their views on the incumbent governor’s administration. Whether these priests were freedmen in urban neighbourhoods, municipal magnates in local temples, or still grander leaders of the provinces, they perceived the imperial cult as something of high [prestige](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prestige) and invested it and Roman rule with glory.

The emotional and political unification of the [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science) was further promoted by submissive or flattering forms of reference or address, adopted even by the highest personages when speaking of the emperor, and by portraits of the emperors or their families with attendant written messages. Of these two most obvious means of [propaganda](https://www.britannica.com/topic/propaganda), the first survives in the texts of many [panegyrics](https://www.britannica.com/art/panegyric) delivered to the throne, [rhetorical](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rhetorical) disquisitions on monarchy, and prefatory announcements accompanying the publication of government edicts. They established a tone in which it was proper to think of Roman rule and government. Portraits, the second means of [propaganda](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/propaganda), included painted ones on general display in cities, sculpted ones, especially in the early years of each reign, based on official models available in a few major cities (hundreds of these survive, including at least one in gold), and engraved ones on [coins](https://www.britannica.com/topic/coin). Imperial coins offered a more rapidly changing exhibition of images than even postage stamps in the modern world. Because the dies soon wore out, many scores of issues had to be brought out each year, in gold, silver, and [bronze](https://www.britannica.com/technology/bronze-alloy). While the images (“types”) and words (“legends”) on them tended to repetition, there was much conscious inculcation of topical messages: for example, in the short and rocky reign of [Galba](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Galba) in AD 69, one finds the [legends](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/legends) “All’s well that ends well” (bonus eventus), “Rome reborn,” “Peace for Romans,” and “Constitutional government restored” (libertas restituta, with iconographic reference to Brutus’ coins of 43 BC) and superlative portraits of Galba himself; or, in other reigns, the legends, enriched with suitable symbolism, read “the soldiers loyal,” “Italy well fed,” and fecunditas of the royal family and its progeny. So far as it is possible to comprehend the mind of the empire’s populace, there was no significant opposition to the government by the 2nd century; instead, there prevailed a great deal of ready veneration for the principate as an institution.

## The [economic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/economic-system) factor

Economic factors, to the extent that they were favourable, played an obvious part in promoting both cultural and political unity. So far as [acculturation](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/acculturation) was concerned, a limit to its achievement was clearly set by the amount of disposable capital among non-Romanized populations. The cost of such luxuries as schooling in Latin or frescoes on one’s walls were high. But more and more people could afford them as the benefits of Roman occupation were spreading. The rising levels of prosperity did not, however, result from a special [benevolence](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/benevolence) on the part of the conquerors, intent as they were (and often cruelly intent) on the pleasures and profits of physical mastery over the conquered. Rather, they can be explained, first, by the imposition of the [Pax Romana](https://www.britannica.com/event/Pax-Romana), which gave urban centres surer access to the surrounding rural areas and rural producers access in turn to convenient, centralized markets; second, by the sheer attractiveness of imported articles, which intensified efforts to increase the power to buy them; third, by the economic stimulation afforded by taxes, which had to be paid on new earnings but which remained in the provinces where they were raised. In the fourth place, prosperity also rose in the regions least Romanized. This can be explained by the fact that they tended to be heavily garrisoned and the soldiers spent their wages locally. So far as they could, they bought goods and services of a Roman sort and generally attracted concentrations of people likely to develop into cities of a Roman sort. The economic impact of army payrolls was all the greater because of the cash added to them from taxes raised in other, more developed provinces in the East. Much of the urbanization and enrichment of the western and northern provinces can be explained by these four factors.

Until the 1950s or ’60s the sources for studying the economy of the empire were insufficient. The archaeological sources were too scarce and [heterogeneous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/heterogeneous) to be of much help, and the written ones contained barely usable amounts of quantified data; economic analysis without quantification, however, is almost a contradiction in terms. Thus discussion was obliged to limit itself to rather general remarks about the obviously wide [exchange](https://www.britannica.com/topic/barter-trade) of goods, the most famous points of production or sale of given articles, techniques of banking, or [commercial law](https://www.britannica.com/topic/business-law). This is still the case with regard to the Eastern half of the Mediterranean world, where excavation has made relatively little headway; but, for the West, archaeological data have greatly increased in recent decades in both quantity and intelligibility. As a result, a growing number of significant statements based on quantification can now be made. They are of special value because they bear on what was economically most important—namely, agriculture. Like any preindustrial economy, that of the empire derived the overwhelming bulk of its [gross national product](https://www.britannica.com/topic/gross-national-product) from food production. One would therefore like to know what regions in what periods produced what rough percentage of the chief comestibles—wine, oil, wheat, garum or legumes. Thanks to techniques such as neutron activation analysis or X-ray fluorescence spectrometry, the contents of large samples of amphorae at certain [market](https://www.britannica.com/topic/market) junctures can be identified, dated by shape of vessel, and occasionally ascribed to certain named producers of the vessel, and the information drawn into a graph; or, the numbers and find-spots of datable fine “china” (so-called [Arretine ware](https://www.britannica.com/art/terra-sigillata-ware) or later equivalents) or ceramic oil lamps from named producers can be indicated on a map of, say, Spain or [France](https://www.britannica.com/place/France). The yield of such data underlies statements made above regarding, for example, the supersession of [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy) as producer of several essential agricultural products by the mid-1st century AD, the [concurrent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/concurrent) transformation of [Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe) from importer to exporter, and the emergence by the 3rd century of northern Africa as a major exporter of certain very common articles. Information of this general nature provides some sense of the shift in prosperity in the Western provinces.

In the age of the [Antonines](https://www.britannica.com/event/Antonines), Rome’s empire enjoyed an obvious and prosperous tranquility; modern [consensus](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/consensus) has even settled on about AD 160 as the peak of Roman civilization. Whatever measurement may be used in this identification, however, an economic one does not fit very well. Evidence, as it accumulates in more quantifiable form, does not seem to show any perceptible economic decline in the empire as a whole after roughly 160. Rather, Italy had probably suffered some decrease in disposable wealth in the earlier 1st century. Gaul’s greatest city, [Lugdunum](https://www.britannica.com/place/Lyon-France), had begun to shrink toward the end of the 2nd, and various other regions in the West suffered setbacks at various times, while all of Greece continued to be poor. Other regions, however, had more wealth to spend, and as is [manifest](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manifest) in major urban projects of utility and beautification or in the larger rooms and increasingly expensive decoration of rural villas. Roman rule also brought extraordinary benefits to the economies of [Numidia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Numidia) and Britain, to name its two most obvious successes.

To the extent the empire grew richer, modern observers are likely to look for an explanation in technology. As noted above, in Augustus’ reign a new mode of [glassblowing](https://www.britannica.com/technology/glassblowing) spread rapidly from [Syria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria) to other production centres; Syria in the 3rd century was also the home of new and more complicated weave patterns. Such rather minor items, however, only show that technical improvements in industry were few and insignificant. The screw press for wine and [olive oil](https://www.britannica.com/topic/olive-oil) was more efficient than the levered variety, but it was not widely adopted, even within Italy. Waterwheels for power, known in Anatolia in Augustus’ reign, were little used; a few examples in Gaul belong only to the later empire. Similarly, the mechanical reaper was found only in Gaul of the 4th century. Perhaps the most significant advances were registered in the selective breeding of strains of grains and domestic animals: for example, the “Roman” [sheep](https://www.britannica.com/animal/domesticated-sheep) (which had originated in the Greek East) spread throughout Europe, banishing the inferior [Iron Age](https://www.britannica.com/event/Iron-Age) species to a merited exile in the [Outer Hebrides](https://www.britannica.com/place/Outer-Hebrides) (the [Soay sheep](https://www.britannica.com/animal/mouflon) of St. Kilda island). What is vastly more significant, however, than these oddments of technological history is the minute subdivision of productive skills and their transmission from father to son in populations adequate to the demand—for iron ore from [Noricum](https://www.britannica.com/place/Noricum), most notably, or for glass and paper from [Alexandria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Alexandria-Egypt). Specialization in inherited skills produced a remarkably high level of proficiency, requiring only the security of the Pax Romana for the spreading of its products everywhere—transport itself being one of those skills.

The health of the economy no doubt helps to explain the political success of the empire, which was not disturbed by frequent revolts or [endemic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/endemic) rural or urban unrest. On the other hand, there were limits in the economy, which expressed themselves through resistance to taxation. Tax levels settled at the enforceable maximum; but revenue fell far short of what one might expect, given the best estimates of the empire’s gross national product. The basic problem was the tiny size of the imperial government and the resulting inefficiency of its processes. Moreover, it could not make good its inadequacies by borrowing in times of special need; Nero’s need to harry his millionaire subjects with false charges of treason in [order](https://www.britannica.com/technology/order-architecture) to pay for his incredibly expensive court and spendthrift impulses reflects the realities of raising revenue. So do the very cautious experiments of Augustus in setting army pay and army size. Ultimately, the military strength of the empire was insufficient—inadequate for emergencies—because of these realities.

## [The army](https://www.britannica.com/topic/armed-force)

The army that enforced the Pax Romana had expanded little beyond the size [envisaged](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/envisaged) for it by Augustus, despite the enlargement of the empire by Claudius, the Flavians, and Trajan. It reached 31 [legions](https://www.britannica.com/topic/legion) momentarily under Trajan, but it usually numbered 28 under the Flavians and Antonines until the onset of the frontier crisis in Aurelius’ reign brought it to 30. Without raising pay rates to attract recruits more easily, a large force was seemingly beyond reach—which probably explains why [Hadrian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hadrian), and later [Commodus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Commodus), halted further expansion.

The army was used not to prop up a militarist government but to defend the frontiers. Shifts in enemy pressures, however, caused the legions to be distributed differently than in Julio-Claudian times. Under [Antoninus Pius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Antoninus-Pius), the Danubian provinces (Pannonia, [Moesia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Moesia), Dacia) had 10, and the East (Anatolia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt) had 9, and both regions also had supporting naval flotillas; of the remaining 9 legions, Britain contained 3 and the Rhineland 4. Tacitus in his Annals (4.5) rates the [auxiliary](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/auxiliary) troops near the turn of the era as being about as numerous as the legionaries. But they soon outnumbered them: that is, whereas legions contained somewhat more than 5,000 men each if they were at full strength and thus totaled roughly 150,000 in the mid-2nd century, the [auxiliaries](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/auxiliaries) numbered 245,000—again, if at full strength. Recent estimates put the actual figure for the entire army at 375,000 to 400,000.

Two reasons, military and financial, explain the growing use of nonlegionaries. Mustered in units mostly of 500, they were easier to move around and could be encouraged to maintain the special native skills of their inheritance—as slingers from the [Balearic Islands](https://www.britannica.com/place/Balearic-Islands) or Crete, in camel corps from Numidia, or as light cavalry from [Thrace](https://www.britannica.com/place/Thrace). In addition, they could be recruited for lower wages than legionaries. As regards recruitment for the legions, even that higher rate proved less and less attractive. Whereas legions in the early empire could be largely filled with men born in Italy and southern Gaul, by the second half of the 1st century most of the men had to be drawn from the provinces; after Trajan, they were largely natives of the frontier provinces. Young men from the inner parts of the empire, growing up in successive generations of continual peace, no longer looked on military service as a natural part of manhood, and the civilian economy appeared attractive compared to the rewards at some frontier posting. Peace and prosperity thus combined to make the army less and less Roman, less and less of the centre, and more and more nearly barbarous.

The troops’ loyalty did not suffer on that account. The men were no more ready to mutiny or to support a pretender around AD 200 than they had been in the early empire. However, experience especially in the year of the four emperors (AD 69) did suggest the desirability of splitting commands into smaller units, which, in turn, involved splitting up provinces, the number of which was constantly growing; by Hadrian’s day subdivision began to anticipate the fragmentation later carried out by [Diocletian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Diocletian).

## Cultural life

The literature of the empire is both abundant and competent, for which the emperors’ encouragement and financing of libraries and [higher education](https://www.britannica.com/topic/higher-education) were perhaps in part responsible. The writers, however, with the possible exception of Christian apologists, were seldom excitingly original and creative. As [Tacitus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tacitus-Roman-historian) said, the great masters of [literature](https://www.britannica.com/art/literature) had ceased to be. Perhaps Augustus’ emphasis on tradition affected more than political ideals and practice. At any rate, men of letters, too, looked often backward. At the same time, they clearly reveal the success of the empire in spreading Greco-Roman [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture), for the majority of them were natives of neither Italy nor Greece. Of the writers in Latin, the two Senecas, [Lucan](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucan-Roman-author), [Martial](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Martial-Roman-poet), Columella, Hyginus, and [Pomponius Mela](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pomponius-Mela) came from Spain; Fronto, Apuleius, and probably Florus and [Aulus Gellius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aulus-Gellius), from Africa. Tacitus was perhaps from [Gallia Narbonensis](https://www.britannica.com/place/Narbonensis). The Latin writers in general sought their models less in Greece than in Augustus’ Golden Age, when [Latin literature](https://www.britannica.com/art/Latin-literature) had reached maturity. Thus, the poets admired [Virgil](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Virgil) and imitated [Ovid](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ovid-Roman-poet); lacking genuine inspiration, they substituted for it an [erudite](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/erudite) cleverness, the fruit of an education that stressed oratory of a striking but sterile kind. Authentic eloquence in Latin came to an end when, as Tacitus put it, the principate “pacified” oratory. Under the Flavians and Antonines, an artificial [rhetoric](https://www.britannica.com/topic/rhetoric), constantly straining after meretricious effects, replaced it. The [epigrammatic](https://www.britannica.com/art/epigram) [aphorism](https://www.britannica.com/art/aphorism) (sententia) was especially cultivated; the epics of Lucan, Valerius Flaccus, [Silius Italicus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Silius-Italicus), and [Statius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Statius) are full of it, and it found a natural outlet in satirical writing, of which the Latin instinct for the mordant always ensured an abundance. In fact, Latin satire excelled: witness Martial’s epigrams, Petronius’ and [Juvenal’s](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Juvenal) pictures of the period, and Persius’ more academic talent. For that matter, Tacitus’ [irony](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/irony) and pessimism were not far removed from satire.

In the East the official status of Greek and the favour it enjoyed from such emperors as Hadrian gave new life to [Greek literature](https://www.britannica.com/art/Greek-literature). It had something in common with its Latin counterpart in that it looked to the past but was chiefly written by authors who were not native to the birthplace of the [language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/language). The so-called [Second Sophistic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Second-Sophistic-school) reverted to the atticism of an earlier day but often in a Roman spirit; its products from the Asian pens of [Dio Chrysostom](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Dio-Chrysostom) and Aelius Aristides are sometimes limpid and talented tours de force but rarely great literature. In Greek, too, the best work was in satire, the comic prose [dialogues](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dialogues) of the Syrian Lucian being the most noteworthy and original literary creations of the period. Among minor writers the charm of Arrian and Pausanias, Asians both, and above all of [Plutarch](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Plutarch) [abides](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/abides) (although Plutarch’s talents were [mediocre](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mediocre), and his moralizing was shallow, his biographies, like those of his Latin contemporary [Suetonius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Suetonius), are full of information and interest).

Imperial encouragement of Greek culture and a [conviction](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conviction), no longer justified, of its artistic and [intellectual](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intellectual) superiority caused the East to resist Latinization. This attitude was bound to lead to a divided empire, and thoughtful observers must have noted it with misgivings. The split, however, was still far in the future. Meanwhile, there was a more immediate cause for disquiet. The [plethora](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/plethora) of summaries and anthologies that appeared implies a public progressively indifferent to reading whole works of literature for themselves. In other words, the outlook for letters was poor, and this had an unfortunate effect on the scientific literature of the age, which was in itself of first-class quality. Dioscorides on botany, Galen on medicine, and Ptolemy on mathematics, astronomy, and geography represent expert scholars expounding carefully, systematically, and lucidly the existing knowledge in their respective fields. But their very excellence proved fatal because, as the reading public dwindled, theirs remained standard works for far too long; their inevitable errors became enshrined, and their works acted as brakes on further progress.

[Stoicism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Stoicism) was the most flourishing philosophy of the age. In the East a sterile scholasticism diligently studied Plato and Aristotle, but [Epictetus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Epictetus-Greek-philosopher), the [stoic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stoic) from Anatolia, was the preeminent philosopher. In the West, stoicism permeates [Seneca’s](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucius-Annaeus-Seneca-Roman-philosopher-and-statesman) work and much of Pliny’s Natural History. Evidently, its [advocacy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/advocacy) of common [morality](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/morality) appealed to the traditional Roman sense of [decorum](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/decorum) and duty, and its doctrine of a world directed by an all-embracing providence struck a responsive chord in the 2nd-century emperors, though they deeply disapproved of its extremist offshoots, the cynics: [Marcus Aurelius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Aurelius-Roman-emperor), as noted, was himself a stoic.

Imperial art, dealing above all with man and his achievements, excelled in portraits and commemoration of events; Roman sculpture and presumably Roman painting, also, owed much to [Greek](https://www.britannica.com/art/Greek-art) styles and techniques. It emerged, however, as its own distinctive type. The Augustan age had pointed the way that Roman art would go: Italian taste would be imposed on Hellenic models to produce something original. The reliefs of the Augustan [Ara Pacis](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ara-Pacis) belong to Rome and Italy, no matter who actually carved them. By Flavian times this Roman artistic instinct had asserted itself and with it the old Roman tendency toward lively and accurate pictorial representation. It can be seen from the reliefs illustrating the triumph over Judaea in the passageway of the [Arch of Titus](https://www.britannica.com/place/Arch-of-Titus) in the [Roman Forum](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Forum). The narrative description dear to Roman art found its best expression in the great spiral frieze on [Trajan’s Column](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Trajans-Column), where the emperor can be seen among his soldiers at various times in the Dacian campaigns; the story of the war plays a most important part, although, like most imperial monuments, the column is meant to exalt the leader. Under Hadrian a reaction made sculpture less markedly Italian, as if to be in conformity with the slow decline of Italy toward quasi-provincial status. Also under Hadrian, the figure of the emperor was more prominent—bigger and more frontal than the other figures—as if to illustrate the growing monarchical tone of the principate. This tendency continued under the Antonines, when there was a magnificent flowering of sculpture on panels, columns, and sarcophagi; but its exuberance and splendour foreshadow the end of classical art.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/06/121406-050-F79083EA/Detail-emperor-Trajans-Column-Rome-Roman-Danube.jpg)

[**Trajan's Column**](https://cdn.britannica.com/06/121406-050-F79083EA/Detail-emperor-Trajans-Column-Rome-Roman-Danube.jpg)

Detail of Trajan's Column, Rome, depicting the Roman emperor's victories beyond the Danube River.

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The artistic currents that flowed in Rome were felt throughout the empire, the less developed areas being influenced most. In the West, provincial sculpture closely resembled Roman, although it sometimes showed variations, in Gaul especially, owing to local influences (the [native element](https://www.britannica.com/science/native-element), however, is not always easy to identify). The Roman quality of portraits painted on Egyptian mummy cases shows that the Greek-speaking regions were also affected, although generally they maintained their own traditions. But by now the Greek East had become rather barren; much of its production was imitative rather than vitally creative. Greece proper contributed little, the centre of Hellenism having shifted to Anatolia, to places such as [Aphrodisias](https://www.britannica.com/place/Aphrodisias), where there was a flourishing school of sculpture.

In at least one respect the East was heavily influenced by Rome. The use of [concrete](https://www.britannica.com/technology/concrete-building-material) and [cross vault](https://www.britannica.com/technology/groin-vault) enabled Roman [architects](https://www.britannica.com/topic/architecture) and engineers to span wide areas; their technological achievements included the covered vastness of the huge thermal establishments, the massive solidity of the amphitheatres, and the [audacity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/audacity) of the soaring bridges and aqueducts. The East was greatly impressed. Admittedly, the agoras and gymnasiums in Greek towns are hardly Roman in aspect, but, for most structures of a practical utilitarian kind, the Greek debt to Rome was heavy. Sometimes Roman influence can be seen not only in the fundamental engineering of such buildings as market gateways, theatres, and amphitheatres but even in such decorative details as composite capitals as well. Roman features abound in exotic [Petra](https://www.britannica.com/place/Petra-ancient-city-Jordan), [Palmyra](https://www.britannica.com/place/Palmyra-Syria), Gerasa, and Baalbek, and even in Athens itself.

# The Later Roman Empire

## The dynasty of the Severi (AD 193–235)

## Septimius Severus

After the assassination of [Commodus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Commodus) on Dec. 31, AD 192, [Helvius Pertinax](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Publius-Helvius-Pertinax), the [prefect](https://www.britannica.com/topic/prefect-ancient-Roman-official) of the city, became emperor. In spite of his modest birth, he was well respected by the [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history), but he was without his own army. He was killed by the praetorians at the end of March 193, after a three-month reign. The praetorians, after much corrupt bargaining, designated as emperor an old general, [Didius Julianus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Didius-Severus-Julianus), who had promised them the largest donativum (a donation given to each soldier on the emperor’s accession). The action of the praetorians roused the ire of the provincial armies. The army of the Danube, which was the most powerful as well as the closest to [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome), appointed [Septimius Severus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Septimius-Severus) in May 193. Severus soon had to face two competitors, supported, like himself, by their own troops: [Pescennius Niger](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pescennius-Niger), the [legate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/legate-Roman-official) of [Syria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria), and [Clodius Albinus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Decimus-Clodius-Septimius-Albinus), legate of Britain. After having temporarily neutralized Albinus by accepting him as Caesar (heir apparent), Septimius marched against Niger, whose troops, having come from [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt) and Syria, were already occupying [Byzantium](https://www.britannica.com/place/Byzantine-Empire). The Danubian legions were victorious, and Niger was killed at the end of 194; [Antioch](https://www.britannica.com/place/Antioch-modern-and-ancient-city-south-central-Turkey) and Byzantium were pillaged after a long siege. Septimius even invaded Mesopotamia, for the Parthians had supported Niger. But this campaign was quickly interrupted: in the West, Albinus, disappointed at not being associated with the [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science), proclaimed himself [Augustus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-Roman-emperor) in 196 and invaded [Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe). He was supported by the troops, by the population, and even by the senators in Rome. In February 197 he was defeated and killed in a difficult battle near his capital of Lugdunum, which, in turn, was almost devastated. Septimius Severus remained the sole master of the empire, but the pillagings, executions, and confiscations left a painful memory. A few months later, in the summer of 197, he launched a second Mesopotamian campaign, this time against the Parthian king [Vologases IV](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vologeses-V), who had attacked the frontier outpost [Nisibis](https://www.britannica.com/place/Nusaybin) conquered two years previously by the Romans. Septimius Severus was again victorious. Having arrived at the Parthian capitals (Seleucia and Ctesiphon), he was defeated near [Hatra](https://www.britannica.com/place/Hatra) but in 198 obtained an advantageous peace: Rome retained a part of Mesopotamia, together with Nisibis, the new [province](https://www.britannica.com/topic/province-ancient-Roman-government) being governed by an [eques](https://www.britannica.com/topic/eques). After having inspected the East, the emperor returned to Rome in 202. He spent most of his time there until 208, when the incursions of Caledonian rebels called him to Britain, where he carried out a three-year campaign along [Hadrian’s Wall](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hadrians-Wall). He died at Eboracum (York) in February 211.

Septimius Severus belonged to a Romanized Tripolitan [family](https://www.britannica.com/topic/family-kinship) that had only recently attained honours. He was born in [Leptis Magna](https://www.britannica.com/place/Leptis-Magna) in [North Africa](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa) and favoured his native land throughout his reign. He was married to [Julia Domna](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julia-Domna) of Emesa, a Syrian woman from an important priestly family, and was surrounded by Easterners. He had pursued a senatorial career and had proved himself a competent general, but he was above all a good administrator and a jurist. Disliking Romans, Italians, and senators, he deliberately relied on the faithful Danubian army that had brought him to power, and he always showed great concern for the provincials and the lower classes. Although he had sought to appropriate the popularity of the Antonines to his own advantage by proclaiming himself the son of [Marcus Aurelius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Aurelius-Roman-emperor) and by naming his own son Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, he in fact carried out a totally different policy—a brutal yet realistic policy that opened careers to new social classes. Indifferent to the [prestige](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prestige) of the Senate, where he had a great many enemies, he favoured the equites. The army thus became the seedbed of the [equestrian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/eques) [order](https://www.britannica.com/technology/order-architecture) and was the object of all of his attentions. The ready forces were increased by the creation of three new legions commanded by equites, and one of these, the Second Parthica, was installed near Rome. Unlike [Vespasian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vespasian), who also owed his power to the army but who knew how to keep it in its proper place, Septimius Severus, aware of the urgency of external problems, established a sort of military monarchy. The praetorian cohorts doubled their ranks, and the dismissal of the old staff of Italian origin transformed the [Praetorian Guard](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Praetorian-Guard) into an imperial guard, in which the elite of the Danube army were the most important element. The [auxiliary](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/auxiliary) troops were increased by the creation of 1,000-man units (infantry cohorts) and cavalry troops, sometimes outfitted with mail armour in the Parthian manner. The careers of noncommissioned officers emerging from the ranks now opened onto new horizons: centurions and noncommissioned grades could attain the tribunate and enter into the equestrian order. Thus, a simple Illyrian peasant might attain high posts: this was undoubtedly the most significant aspect of the “Severan revolution.” This “democratization” was not necessarily a barbarization, for the provincial legions had long been Romanized. Their salaries were increased, and donativa were distributed more frequently; thenceforth, soldiers were fed at the expense of the provincials. Veterans received lands, mostly in Syria and Africa. The right of [legitimate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/legitimate) marriage, previously refused by Augustus, was granted to almost all of the soldiers, and the right to form collegia (private associations) was given to noncommissioned officers. Because more than a century had passed since the last raise in pay for the troops, despite a steady (if slow) rise in the level of prices, Severus increased the legionary’s base rate from 300 to 500 denarii, with, no doubt, corresponding increases in other ranks. The reflection of this step in the content of [precious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/precious) metal in silver coinage recalls a point made earlier: the imperial revenues were constrained within the narrow limits of political and administrative reality.

The administrative accomplishments of Septimius Severus were of great importance: he clearly outlined the powers of the city prefect; he entrusted the praetorian prefecture to first-class jurists, such as Papinian; and he increased the number of procurators, who were recruited for financial posts from among Africans and Easterners and for government posts (praesides) from among Danubian officers. [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy) lost its privileges and found itself subjected, like all the other provinces, to the new [*annona*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/annona), a tax paid in kind, which assured the maintenance of the army and of the officials. The consequent increase in expenditures—for administration, for the salaries and the donativa of the soldiers, for the maintenance of the Roman [plebs](https://www.britannica.com/topic/plebeian), and for construction—obliged the emperor to devalue the denarius in 194. But the confiscations increased his personal fortune, the res privata, which had been previously created by Antoninus.

Severus’ social policy favoured both the provincial recruitment of senators (Easterners, Africans, and even Egyptians), causing a sharp decrease in the percentage of Italian senators, and the elevation of the equestrian order, which began to fill the prince’s council with its jurists. The cities, which had been favoured by the Antonines, were more and more considered as administrative wheels in the service of the state: the richest decuriones (municipal councillors) were financially responsible for levying the taxes, and it was for this purpose that the towns of Egypt finally received a boulē (municipal senate).

The burden of taxes and forced government service was made weightier by numerous transport duties for the army and for the annona service and was regulated by the jurists through financial, personal, or mixed charges. The state was watchful to keep the decuriones in the service of their cities and to provide a control on their administration through the appointment of curatores rei publicae, or officials of the central government. The lower classes were, in principle, protected against the abuses of the rich, but in fact they were placed at the service of the state through the restrictions imposed on shipping and commercial corporations. Membership might entail forced contributions of capital or labour to such public necessities as the supply of food to Rome. The state became more and more a policeman, and the excesses of power of numerous grain merchants (frumentarii) weighed heavily on the little man.

Imperial power, without [repudiating](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/repudiating) the ideological themes of the principate, rested in fact on the army and sought its legitimacy in heredity: the two sons of Septimius Severus, Caracalla and [Geta](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Publius-Septimius-Geta), were first proclaimed Caesars, the former in 196, the latter in 198; later, they were directly associated with imperial power through bestowal of the title of Augustus, in 198 and 209, respectively. Thus, during the last three years of Septimius Severus’ reign, the empire had three Augusti at its head.

## [Caracalla](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Caracalla)

Caracalla, the eldest son of Septimius Severus, reigned from 211 to 217, after having assassinated his younger brother, Geta. He was a [caricature](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/caricature) of his father: violent, megalomaniacal, full of complexes, and, in addition, cruel and debauched. He retained the entourage of the equites and jurists who had governed with his father but enforced to an even greater degree his father’s militaristic and egalitarian policy. He increased the wages of the army even further and, at the same time, began a costly building program that quickly depleted the fortune left him by his father. He forced the senators to pay heavy contributions, doubled the inheritance and emancipation taxes, and often required the aurum coronarium (a contribution in gold), thereby ruining the urban middle classes. To counter the effects of a general upward drift of prices and the larger and better-paid army of his own and his father’s making, he created a new silver [coin](https://www.britannica.com/topic/coin), the antoninianus. It was intended to replace the basic denarius at double its value, though containing only about one and a half times its worth in precious metal. The only historical source to suggest Caracalla’s motive for his gift of universal citizenship, [Dio Cassius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Dio-Cassius), states that it was meant to increase revenues by bringing new elements of the population under tax obligations formerly limited to Romans only.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/67/135267-050-148E8C08/marble-Caracalla-Roman-New-York-City-Metropolitan-217-ce.jpg)

[**Caracalla**](https://cdn.britannica.com/67/135267-050-148E8C08/marble-Caracalla-Roman-New-York-City-Metropolitan-217-ce.jpg)

Caracalla, marble, Roman, 212–217 CE; in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

Photograph by Katie Chao. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, Samuel D. Lee Fund, 1940 (40.11.1a)

Although little endowed with military qualities, Caracalla adopted as his patron [Alexander the Great](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alexander-the-Great), whom he admired greatly, and embarked on an active external policy. He fought successfully against the Teutonic tribes of the upper Danube, among whom the [Alamanni](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Alemanni), as well as the Capri of the middle Danube, appeared for the first time; he often prudently mixed military operations with negotiation and gave important subsidies and money (in sound currency) to the barbarians, thus arousing much discontent. His ambition was to triumph in the East like his hero of old and, more recently, [Trajan](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Trajan) and his own father. He invaded Armenia and Adiabene and annexed Osroëne in northwest Mesopotamia, joining it to the part of Mesopotamia taken by Septimius Severus. In April 217, while pursuing his march on the Tigris, he was assassinated on the order of one of his praetorian prefects, Marcus Opellius Macrinus.

## [Macrinus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Macrinus)

Macrinus was accepted as emperor by the soldiers, who were unaware of the role he had played in the death of his predecessor. For the first time an eques had acceded to the empire after having been no more than a manager of financial affairs. The senators reluctantly accepted this member of the equestrian order, who, nevertheless, proved to be moderate and conciliatory; but the armies despised him as a mere civilian, and the ancient authors were hostile to him. His reign was brief, and little is known of him. He concluded an inglorious peace with the Parthians, which assured Mesopotamia to Rome through the payment of large sums of money. And to make himself popular, he canceled Caracalla’s tax increases and reduced military expenditures. A plot against him was soon organized: two young grandnephews of Septimius Severus were persuaded by their mothers and especially by their grandmother, [Julia Maesa](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julia-Maesa), the sister of Julia Domna (who had recently died), to reach for imperial power. The eldest, Bassianus, was presented to the troops of Syria, who had been bought with gold, and was proclaimed in April 218. Shortly afterward, Macrinus was defeated and killed, as was his son (whom he had associated with him on the throne).

## Elagabalus and Severus Alexander

The new emperor was presented as the son of Caracalla, whose name he took (Marcus Aurelius Antoninus). He is better known, however, under the name [Elagabalus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Elagabalus), the god whose high priest he was and whom he quickly and imprudently attempted to impose on the Romans, in spite of his grandmother’s [counsel](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/counsel) of moderation. Fourteen years old, he caused himself to be detested by his heavy expenditures, his orgies, and the dissolute behaviour of his circle. The [praetorians](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Praetorian-Guard) killed him in 222 and proclaimed as emperor his first cousin, Alexianus, who took the name of [Severus Alexander](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Severus-Alexander).

Although well educated and full of good intentions, Severus Alexander showed some weakness of character by submitting to the counsel of his mother, Mamaea, and of his grandmother, Maesa. The Scriptores historiae Augustae, a collection of biographies of the emperors, attributes to him a complete program of reforms favourable to the Senate, but these reforms are not mentioned elsewhere. As in the time of Septimius Severus, his [counselors](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/counselors) were equites. [Ulpian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ulpian), the praetorian prefect, was the greatest jurist of this period, and the basic policies of the founder of the [dynasty](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dynasty) were carried on, but with less energy. This weakening of energy had disastrous results: in Persia, the Arsacids were replaced in 224 by the more ambitious [Sāsānid](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sasanian-dynasty) dynasty, who hoped to recover the former possessions of the Achaemenids in the East. Their initial attacks were stopped in 232 by a campaign that was, however, poorly conducted by the emperor and that alienated the army as a result of its [ineptitude](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ineptitude). In Rome there were frequent disorders, and, as early as 223, Ulpian had been killed by the praetorians. While gathered on the Rhine to fight the Teutons, the soldiers once again revolted and killed Severus Alexander and his mother. A coarse and uneducated but energetic soldier, [Maximinus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maximinus) the Thracian, succeeded him without difficulty in March 235. The Severan dynasty had come to an end.

# [Religious](https://www.britannica.com/topic/religious-syncretism) and cultural life in the 3rd century

On the right bank of the Tiber in [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-religion), in the least fashionable section of town among Lebanese and Jewish labourers, [Elagabalus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Elagabalus) built an elegant temple to his ancestral god; he was no doubt in those precincts very well received when he presided personally at its inauguration. Yet the world that counted, the world of senators and centurions, reacted with indignation. Within the capital the ruler was expected to honour the gods of the capital, the ancient Roman ones. At the same time, it was deemed appropriate that he reverently recognize other gods, in their place; for this reason a biography presenting [Severus Alexander](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Severus-Alexander) for the reader’s admiration records how scrupulously he offered worship on the Capitoline to [Jupiter](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jupiter-Roman-god), while also having, in a chapel attached to his domestic quarters, the images of his lares (household gods), of the deified emperors of most beloved memory, and of such superhuman beings as the Greeks would have called “heroes,” including Apollonius the holy man of Tyana, Christ, Abraham, and Orpheus. The furnishing of the chapel is described by a most dubious source; but if it is not history, it is at least revealing of ideals. A Roman ruler was to express not only the piety of the capital and its citizens but also that of all his people throughout his [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science). Imperial religion was properly [compounded](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compounded) of both Roman and non-Roman piety.

Official religion can hardly be said to have existed in the sense of being pressed on people by the state. But the statement needs qualification. The cults of Rome were certainly official in the city itself; they were supported out of the state treasury and by the devotion of the emperor, at least if he lived up to what everyone felt were his responsibilities. In the army, too, camps had shrines in which portraits of the emperor were displayed for veneration on certain days of the year. A 3rd-century calendar has been found in an Eastern city that specifies for the garrison regiment the religious ceremonies to be carried out during the year, including a number of the oldest and most traditional ones in Rome. Many Western cities accorded special size and prominence to a temple in which Jupiter or the imperial [family](https://www.britannica.com/topic/family-kinship) or both together were worshiped not by orders from on high, it is true, but spontaneously. The ubiquity of the imperial cult has already been emphasized. All these [manifestations](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manifestations) of piety gave some quality of “Romanness” to the religion of the empire.

On the other hand, the empire had been assembled from a great number of parts, whose peoples already had their own way of life fully matured; they were not about to surrender it nor, in fact, were they ever asked to do so by their conquerors. What characterized the religious life of the empire as a whole was the continued vitality of local cults in combination with a generally reverent awareness of one’s neighbours’ cults. The emperor, for example, might openly offer personal veneration to his favourite god, a god outside the traditional Roman circle, while also practicing a more conventional piety. When he was on his travels, he would offer cult at the chief shrines of all the localities he visited. What was expected of the emperor was expected of everyone: respectful toleration of all components in the religious amalgam. Of course, there were differences according to individual temperament and degree of education; approaches to religion might be literal or philosophical, [fervent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fervent) or relaxed. Rural society was more [conservative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conservative) than urban. But the whole can fairly be called an [integrated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/integrated) system.

Just as the special power of the Greek gods had gained recognition among the Etruscans and, subsequently, among the Romans in remote centuries BC or as [Serapis](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Serapis) in Hellenistic times had come to be worshiped in scattered parts of the Ptolemies’ realm—Macedonia and Ionia, for example—so at last the news of unfamiliar gods was carried by their worshipers to distant places in the Roman Empire where, too, they worked their wonders, attracted reverent attention, and received a pillared lodging, a priesthood, and daily offerings. The [Pax Romana](https://www.britannica.com/event/Pax-Romana) encouraged a great deal more than commerce in material objects. It made inevitable the [exchange](https://www.britannica.com/topic/barter-trade) of ideas in a more richly woven and complex fabric than the Mediterranean world had ever seen, in which the Phrygian Cybele was at home also in [Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe) and the Italian [Silvanus](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Silvanus-Roman-god) in northern Africa.

Religious developments in the Eastern provinces during the centuries from [Augustus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-Roman-emperor) to Severus Alexander followed a somewhat different course from those in the West. In the East the further jumbling together of already well-mixed traditions encouraged a tolerance that eroded their edges. It became possible to see predominant similarities in Selene, [Artemis](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Anastasius-II-Byzantine-emperor), and Isis, in [Zeus](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Zeus), Iarhibol, Helios, and Serapis, or in Cybele, Ma, and Bellona. From recognition of basic similarities one might reason to a sort of monotheism, by the lights of which, for persons given to theology, local deities were no more than narrow expressions of greater truths. A juncture was then natural with Neoplatonism, the school of philosophy that later came to be held in high regard.

On the other hand, in [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy), the Danube provinces, and the Western provinces, religious change and development can be more easily seen in the immigration of worshipers of Easter deities. Those took root and became popular—none more so than Mithra, though Isis, Cybele, and Jupiter of Doliche were close behind. Apuleius in the closing chapters of his novel usually called The Golden Ass in English describes how a young man is brought from mere [consciousness](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/consciousness) of Isis as a famous goddess with certain well-known rites and attributes, to a single-minded devotion to her. Aelius Aristides, a famous rhetorician of the time, recounts in his spiritual diary the development of a similar devotion in himself to Asclepius. Both the fictional and the factual account give a central place to benefits miraculously granted. It was by such means that piety was ordinarily warmed to a special fervour, whether or not that process should be called conversion. In any case, it produced the testimonies—votive inscriptions, temples, and so forth—through which it is possible to trace the spread of foreign cults. Eastern cults, however, also introduced to the West complex liturgies, beliefs underlying beliefs that could be explained in especially dramatic ways to special devotees (“mysteries”), and much rich symbolism. Of no cult was this more true than [Mithraism](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mithraism), known to the 20th century through excavation of the underground shrines that it preferred.

## The rise of [Christianity](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christianity)

During the 1st and 2nd centuries, Christianity spread with relative slowness. The doctrines of Jesus, who was crucified about AD 30, first took root among the Jews of Palestine, where a large number of sects were proliferating—orthodox sects, such as the Sadducees and the Pharisees, as well as dissident and sometimes persecuted sects such as the Essenes, whose [ascetic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ascetic) practices have been [illuminated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/illuminated) by the discovery of the [Dead Sea Scrolls](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dead-Sea-Scrolls) in the mid-20th century. At the end of [Tiberius’](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tiberius) reign, Christianity had spread to the gentiles as a result of the preaching of [St. Paul](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Paul-the-Apostle) in Anatolia and in Greece. At the same time, Christianity continued to make progress among the Jews of Jerusalem, Alexandria, and [Syria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria) and quickly reached even Osroëne and the Parthian towns of the Euphrates, where Jewish colonies were numerous. The Roman authorities at first had difficulty in distinguishing the “Christos” believers from the orthodox Jews, but the religion of the former, on leaving its original [milieu](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/milieu), quickly became [differentiated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/differentiated).

A familiar charge against the Jews, however, continued to pursue the Christians: that they felt a hatred of mankind. Their expectation of the end of the world aroused a suspicion that that was what they indeed desired; moreover, they were also suspect for their aloofness—they cut themselves off from family and community—and for their meetings, whose purpose was obscure. Their 2nd-century spokesmen had to dispel the belief, often recorded, that they practiced magic involving cannibalism; further, that they indulged in sex orgies, incestuous to boot; and, the most common accusation of all, that they were atheists—people who denied the existence of the gods and rejected accepted cults. This last charge, which was, of course, exactly on the mark, must be set in the [context](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/context) of occasional episodes of mob violence against (non-Christian) atheists or doubters. Here the association of Christians with Jews, equally monotheistic, might have provided some protection for the Christians, but the Jews were faithful to a cult of the greatest antiquity and, moreover, had long made their peace with Caesar, Augustus, and their successors. It was a peace that could not extend to people who had (it would be alleged) apostasized from their own Judaism. Christians did not participate in the Jewish revolt of 66–73, and, under the Flavians, Christianity completely severed itself from its origins.

At this time the East was the centre of the new religion, whose followers grew in numbers from [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt) to the [Black Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Black-Sea) and were beginning to be noticed in [Bithynia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Bithynia) and in Greece. Christians seemed fairly numerous in Rome as early as the end of the 1st century. When the age of the Apostles ended, the age of the church began, with its bishops, presbyters, and deacons, with its catechism, preaching, and celebration of the Eucharist. In the 2nd century, Christianity began to reach the [intellectuals](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intellectuals). Hellenistic [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture) offered educated Christians the resources of philosophical dialectic and of sophist [rhetoric](https://www.britannica.com/topic/rhetoric). The example of [Philo of Alexandria](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Philo-Judaeus) had shown in the 1st century that it was possible to [reconcile](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reconcile) the Bible with the great [Platonic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Platonic) ideas. By the 2nd century the Christian “[apologists](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Apologist)” tried to show that Christianity was in harmony with Greco-Roman humanism and that it was intellectually, and above all morally, superior to paganism.

But the Christians did not succeed in convincing the authorities. The first [persecution](https://www.britannica.com/topic/religious-persecution), that of Nero, was related to a devastating fire in the capital in 64, for which the Christians were blamed or, perhaps, only made the scapegoats. In any case, their position as bad people (mali homines of the sort a governor should try to suppress) had been established, and later suppressions could be justified by reference to “the Neronian practice.” So far as [criminal law](https://www.britannica.com/topic/criminal-law) was concerned, such a precedent had considerable authority, of the sort that [Pliny](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pliny-the-Younger), as governor, was looking for in his handling of the Christians of Bithynia-Pontus in 111. His master, the emperor [Trajan](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Trajan), told him not to seek them out but to execute those who, being informed against, refused to abjure their religion. [Hadrian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hadrian) and other successors hewed to the same line thereafter. Thus, the persecutions remained localized and sporadic and were the result of private denunciations or of spontaneous popular protests. Under [Marcus Aurelius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Aurelius-Roman-emperor), the difficulties of the times often caused the Christians, who refused to sacrifice to the state gods and to participate in the imperial cult, to be accused of provoking the wrath of the gods: [martyrs](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/martyrs) appeared in the East, in Rome, in Gaul, and in Africa. [Commodus’](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Commodus) reign was more favourable to them, perhaps because certain members of his circle, not a very [edifying](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/edifying) one in other respects, were Christians or Christian sympathizers. This reprieve, however, was short-lived: [Septimius Severus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Septimius-Severus) inaugurated the first systematic persecution. In 202 an edict forbade Christian (and Jewish) proselytism. Members of extremist sects were persecuted for preaching continence (which violated Augustus’ laws against celibacy), for holding the state in [contempt](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/contempt), and especially for refusing military service. Under [Caracalla](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Caracalla), the situation quieted, and the church continued to progress, favoured perhaps by the relative freedom that the law granted to funerary collegia (whence the first catacombs).

## Cultural life from the Antonines to Constantine

[Latin literature](https://www.britannica.com/art/Latin-literature) enjoyed its “[Silver Age](https://www.britannica.com/event/Silver-Age-Latin-literature)” under the Antonines, with the majority of great authors, such as [Tacitus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tacitus-Roman-historian), [Juvenal](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Juvenal), and [Pliny the Younger](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pliny-the-Younger), having begun their careers under [Domitian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Domitian). They had no heirs: after Tacitus, Roman history was reduced to biography. It was only in the 4th century that history began to flourish again, with [Ammianus Marcellinus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ammianus-Marcellinus), a Greek writing in Latin. Satire, the Roman [genre](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/genre) par excellence, came to an end with Juvenal; and Pliny the Younger, a diligent rhetorician but with a lesser degree of talent, had only the [mediocre](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mediocre) Fronto as a successor. More original was the aforementioned rhetorician, scholar, and picaresque novelist [Apuleius of Madauros](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucius-Apuleius).

A Greek renaissance, however, took place during the 2nd century. The [Second Sophistic school](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Second-Sophistic-school) reigned in every area: in [rhetoric](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rhetoric), history, philosophy, and even in the sciences. Schools of rhetoric and philosophy prospered in the East—in Smyrna, Ephesus, Pergamum, Rhodes, Alexandria, and even in Athens—protected and subsidized by the emperors, from [Vespasian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vespasian) to Marcus Aurelius. The great sophists were [Herodes Atticus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Herodes-Atticus), a multimillionaire from Athens; Polemon; and [Aelius Aristides](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aelius-Aristides), a valetudinarian devotee of Asclepius. [Dio Cassius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Dio-Cassius) and Herodian were [conscientious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conscientious) and useful historians (first half of the 3rd century), as was later Dexippus the Athenian, whose work survives only in fragments. Science was represented by the mathematician Nicomachus of Gerasa; medicine, by Galen of Pergamum; astronomy, by the Alexandrian Ptolemy. Law remained the only Roman science, exemplified under the Antonines by Salvius Julianus and Gaius (the Institutiones) and rising to its zenith in the 3rd century as a result of the works of three jurists: Papinian, Ulpian, and Modestinus. Philosophy, heavily influenced by rhetoric and [ethics](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethics), was represented under Domitian and Trajan by [Dio](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Dio-Chrysostom) (or Chrysostom) of Prusa, who outlined the [stoical](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stoical) doctrine of the ideal [sovereign](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sovereign). The biographer [Plutarch](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Plutarch) and [Lucian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lucian) of Samosata were more [eclectic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/eclectic), especially Lucian, who resembled Voltaire in his caustic [skepticism](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/skepticism). Under Marcus Aurelius, one of Lucian’s friends, [Celsus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Celsus), wrote the first serious [criticism](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/criticism) of Christianity, “The True Word,” known through Origen’s refutation of it in the 3rd century. At this time philosophy leaned toward religious mysticism: under the Severans, [Ammonius Saccas](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ammonius-Saccas) created the school of Alexandria, and his [disciple](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disciple) Plotinus founded the Neoplatonist school, which was to fight bitterly against Christianity. After the apologists and, above all, [Tertullian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tertullian) (c. 160–after 222), Christian thought deepened, and theology made its appearance. [Clement](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Clement-of-Alexandria) and [Origen](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Origen) (c. 185–c. 254), the greatest theologian of the time, were the luminaries of the church of Alexandria; the Roman church still wrote in Greek and was represented by the slightly old-fashioned [Hippolytus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Hippolytus-of-Rome); and the church of Africa had a powerful personality, St. Cyprian, bishop of [Carthage](https://www.britannica.com/place/Carthage-ancient-city-Tunisia).

The disappearance of the great lyric and poetic styles, the fossilizing of education as it came to be completely based on rhetoric (paideia), and the growing importance of philosophical and religious polemical literature among both pagans and Christians were the basic traits that, as early as the 3rd century, foreshadowed the [intellectual](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intellectual) life of the late empire.

## Military anarchy and the disintegration of the empire (235–270)

## Succession of emperors and usurpers

The period from the death of Severus Alexander to the time of [Claudius II Gothicus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Claudius-II-Gothicus) was marked by usurpations and [barbarian invasions](https://www.britannica.com/topic/barbarian-invasions). After [Maximinus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maximinus) the Thracian, who bravely fought the Alemanni but showed great hostility toward the [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history) and the educated elite, the [Gordians](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gordian-I) rose to power as a result of a [revolt](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gordian-II) by wealthy African landowners. A senatorial reaction first imposed civilian emperors, [Pupienus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pupienus-Maximus) and [Balbinus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Balbinus) together, and then named [Gordian III](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gordian-III), a youth backed by his father-in-law, the praetorian [prefect](https://www.britannica.com/topic/prefect-ancient-Roman-official) [Timesitheus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaius-Furius-Sabinus-Aquila-Timesitheus). Gordian III was murdered by the soldiers during a campaign against the Persians and was replaced, first by [Philip](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Philip-Roman-emperor) the Arabian and then by [Decius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Decius), both soldiers. Decius tried to restore Roman traditions and also persecuted the Christians, but he was killed by the [Goths](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Goth) in 251 in a battle near the Black Sea. From 253 to 268 two Roman senators, [Valerian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Valerian-Roman-emperor) and his son [Gallienus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gallienus), reigned. Valerian revived the persecution of the Christians, but he was captured by the Persians during a disastrous campaign and died in captivity (260; see photograph). His son then reigned alone, facing multiple invasions and several usurpations. He moved constantly between the Rhine and the Danube, achieving brilliant victories (Milan in 262, the Nestus in 267), but the Pannonian army raised several competitors against him (Ingenuus, Regalianus, Aureolus). Too busy to protect the Gauls against the Franks and the Alemanni and the East against the Persians, he had to tolerate the formation of the Gallic empire under the praetorian prefect [Marcus Cassianius Postumus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Cassianius-Latinius-Postumus) (259–268) and the Palmyrene kingdom of Odenathus (260–267). Some of his reforms were a foreshadowing of the future: the senators were practically excluded from the army; the [equites](https://www.britannica.com/topic/eques) received the majority of commands and of provincial governorships; and the [composition](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/composition) of the army was modified by the creation of new army corps and especially of a strong cavalry, which was placed under the command of a single leader and charged with closing the [breaches](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/breaches) that the barbarians were opening along the frontiers. Upon his father’s death Gallienus had put an end to the persecution of the Christians, preferring to fight the new religion through intellectual means; to that end, he favoured the ancient Greek cults (Demeter of Eleusis) and protected the Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus. These [initiatives](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/initiatives) increased the number of his enemies, particularly among the patriotic senators and the Pannonian generals. While Gallienus was in Milan besieging the usurper Aureolus, he was killed by his chiefs of staff, who proclaimed [Claudius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Claudius-II-Gothicus) II (268), the first of the Illyrian emperors. The new emperor won a great victory against the Alemanni on the Garda lake and overwhelmed the Goths in Naissus (269) but died of the plague in 270. This fatal period brought to light one of the major defects of the empire: the lack of a [legitimate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/legitimate) principle of succession and the preponderant role of the army in politics. The structures that had created the strength of the principate were weakened, and the empire required deep reforms. Gallienus had felt their necessity but had been too weak to impose them.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/48/1048-050-09EE107B/surrender-Valerian-Shapur-rock-relief-province-Persian.jpg)

[**Valerian surrendering to Shāpūr I**](https://cdn.britannica.com/48/1048-050-09EE107B/surrender-Valerian-Shapur-rock-relief-province-Persian.jpg)

The surrender of the emperor Valerian to the Persian king Shāpūr I, rock relief, 260 CE; in the province of Fārs, Iran.

# The [barbarian invasions](https://www.britannica.com/topic/barbarian-invasions)

The Goths were Germans coming from what is now Sweden and were followed by the [Vandals](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vandal-Germanic-people), the Burgundians, and the [Gepidae](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Gepidae). The aftereffect of their march to the southeast, toward the [Black Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Black-Sea), was to push the Marcomanni, the Quadi, and the Sarmatians onto the Roman limes in [Marcus Aurelius’](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Aurelius-Roman-emperor) time. Their presence was brusquely revealed when they attacked the Greek towns on the Black Sea about 238. Timesitheus fought against them under [Gordian III](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gordian-III), and under Philip and [Decius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Decius) they besieged the towns of [Moesia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Moesia) and [Thrace](https://www.britannica.com/place/Thrace), led by their kings, Ostrogotha and Kniva. Beginning in 253, the Crimean Goths and the [Heruli](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Heruli) appeared and dared to venture on the seas, ravaging the shores of the Black Sea and the Aegean as well as several [Greek](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Greece) towns. In 267 Athens was taken and plundered despite a strong defense by the historian [Dexippus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Publius-Herennius-Dexippus). After the victories of [Gallienus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gallienus) on the Nestus and Claudius at Naissus (Nish), there was for a time less danger. But the countries of the middle Danube were still under pressure by the Marcomanni, Quadi, Iazyges, Sarmatians, and the [Carpi](https://www.britannica.com/place/Carpi) of free [Dacia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Dacia), who were later joined by the Roxolani and the Vandals. In spite of stubborn resistance, Dacia was gradually overwhelmed, and it was abandoned by the Roman troops, though not evacuated officially. When [Valerian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Valerian-Roman-emperor) was captured in AD 259/260, the Pannonians were gravely threatened, and Regalianus, one of the usurpers proclaimed by the Pannonian legions, died fighting the invaders. The defense was concentrated around Sirmium and Siscia-Poetovio, the ancient fortresses that had been restored by Gallienus, and many cities were burned.

In the West the invasions were particularly violent. The Germans and the Gauls were driven back several times by the confederated [Frankish](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Frank-people) tribes of the [North Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Sea) coast and by the Alemanni from the middle and upper Rhine. Gallienus fought bitterly, concentrating his defense around Mainz and Cologne, but the usurpations in [Pannonia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pannonia) prevented him from obtaining any lasting results. In 259–260 the Alemanni came through the [Agri Decumates](https://www.britannica.com/place/Agri-Decumates) (the territory around the Black Forest), which was now lost to the Romans. Some of the Alemanni headed for [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy) across the Alpine passes; others attacked [Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe), devastating the entire eastern part of the country. Passing through the Rhône Valley, they eventually reached the Mediterranean; and some bands even continued into Spain. There they joined the Franks, many of whom had come by ship from the North Sea, after having plundered the western part of Gaul. Sailing up the estuaries of the great rivers, they had reached Spain and then, crossing the [Strait of Gibraltar](https://www.britannica.com/place/Strait-of-Gibraltar), had proceeded to Mauretania Tingitana. Gallienus, outflanked, entrusted Gaul and his young son Saloninus to Postumus, who then killed Saloninus and proclaimed himself emperor. The several invasions had so frightened the people that the new emperor was readily accepted, even in Spain and Britain. He devoted himself first to the defense of the country and was finally considered a [legitimate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/legitimate) emperor, having established himself as a rival to Gallienus, who had tried in vain to eliminate him but finally had to tolerate him. Postumus governed with moderation, and, in good Roman fashion, minted excellent coins. He, too, was killed by his soldiers, but he had successors who lasted until 274.

## Difficulties in the East

In the East the frontiers had been fixed by [Hadrian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hadrian) at the Euphrates. But under Nero, the Romans had claimed control over the kings of Armenia, and under [Caracalla](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Caracalla) they had annexed Osroëne and Upper Mesopotamia. The Parthian [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science) had been weak and often troubled, but the Sāsānids were more dangerous. In 241, [Shāpūr I](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Shapur-I) (Sapor), an ambitious organizer and statesman, mounted the throne: he united his empire by bringing the Iranian lords into line and by protecting the Zoroastrian religion. He also tolerated the Manichaeans and put an end to the persecutions of the Christians and Jews, thereby gaining the sympathy of these [communities](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/communities). In 252, with a large army at his command, Shāpūr imposed Artavasdes on Armenia, attacked Mesopotamia, and took [Nisibis](https://www.britannica.com/place/Nusaybin). In 256 his advance troops entered [Cappadocia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cappadocia) and [Syria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria) and plundered [Antioch](https://www.britannica.com/place/Antioch-ancient-city-west-central-Turkey), while [Doura-Europus](https://www.britannica.com/place/Dura-Europus), on the middle Euphrates, was likewise falling to him. Valerian had rushed to its aid, but he could not remedy the situation; and in 259 or 260 he was imprisoned by Shāpūr during operations about which little is known. Mesopotamia was lost and [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome) was pushed back to the Euphrates. Cappadocia, [Cilicia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cilicia), and Syria were again plundered, and a puppet emperor was appointed in Antioch. But these victories were transitory: in Osroëne, Edessa had shown resistance, a defense was organized in Cappadocia and Cilicia, and Odenathus, the prince of [Palmyra](https://www.britannica.com/place/Palmyra-Syria), took Shāpūr by surprise and forced him back to Iran. Having thus aided the Roman cause, [Odenathus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Septimius-Odaenathus) then began to act in his own interest: he continued the fight against the Persians and took the title “King of Kings.” The Romans officially entrusted him with the defense of the East and conferred on him the governorship of several provinces; the “kingdom” of Palmyra thus extended from Cilicia to [Arabia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Arabia-Roman-province). He was murdered in 267 without ever having severed his ties with Gallienus. His widow [Zenobia](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Zenobia) had her husband’s titles granted to their son [Vaballathus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Wahballat). Then in 270, taking advantage of the deaths of Gallienus and Claudius II, she invaded [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt) and a part of Anatolia. This invasion was followed by a rupture with Rome, and in 271 Vaballathus was proclaimed Imperator Caesar Augustus. The latent separatism of the Eastern provinces and, undoubtedly, some commercial advantages caused them to accept Palmyrene domination without difficulty, as they had, in the past, supported Avidius Cassius and [Pescennius Niger](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pescennius-Niger) against the legitimate emperors. In 272 unity was restored by Aurelian, but Mesopotamia was lost, and the Euphrates became the new frontier of the empire.

## Economic and social crisis

The invasions and the civil wars worked in combination to disrupt and weaken the empire over a span of half a century. Things were at their worst in the 260s, but the entire period from 235 to 284 brought the empire close to collapse. Many regions were laid waste (northern Gaul, Dacia, Moesia, Thrace, and numerous towns on the Aegean); many important cities had been pillaged or destroyed (Byzantium, Antioch, Olbia, Lugdunum); and northern Italy (Cisalpine Gaul) had been overrun by the Alemanni. During the crisis, the emperor either focused his forces on the defense of one point, inviting attack at another, or he left some embattled frontier altogether to its own devices; any commander who proved successful had the emperorship thrust upon him, on the very heels of his victories over the invaders. Counting several sons and brothers, more than 40 emperors thus established themselves for a reign of some sort, long or (more often) short. The political destabilization fed on itself, but it also was responsible for heavy expenditure of life and treasure. To keep pace with the latter, successive emperors rapidly and radically reduced the percentage of [precious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/precious) metal in the standard silver coins to almost nothing so as to spread it over larger issues. What thus became a fiduciary currency held up not too badly until the 260s, when confidence collapsed and people rushed to turn the money they had into goods of real value. An incredible inflation got under way, lasting for decades.

The severity of damage done to the empire by the political and economic destabilization is not easily estimated since for this period the sources of every sort are extremely poor. Common sense would suggest that commerce was disrupted, taxes collected more harshly and unevenly, homes and harvests destroyed, the value of savings lost to inflation, and the economy in general badly shaken. A severe [plague](https://www.britannica.com/science/plague) is reported that lasted for years in mid-century, producing terrible casualties. In some western areas, [archaeology](https://www.britannica.com/science/archaeology) provides illustration of what one might expect: cities in Gaul were walled, usually in much reduced circuits; villas here and there throughout the Rhine and Danube provinces also were walled; road systems were defended by lines of fortlets in northern Gaul and adjoining Germany; and a few areas, such as Brittany, were abandoned or relapsed into pre-Roman primitiveness. Off the coasts of that peninsula and elsewhere, too, piracy reigned; on land, brigandage occurred on a large scale. The reentrant triangle of land between the upper Danube and upper Rhine had to be permanently abandoned to the barbarians around it in about 260. The [Pax Romana](https://www.britannica.com/event/Pax-Romana) had then, in all these [manifest](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manifest) ways, been seriously disrupted. On the other hand, in Egypt, where inflation is most amply documented, its harmful effects cannot be detected. The Egyptian economy showed no signs of collapse. Furthermore, some regions—most of Britain, for example—emerged from the half-century of crisis in a more prosperous condition than before. A summary of the effects of crisis can only underline one single fact that is almost self-evident: the wonders of civilization attained under the Antonines required an essentially political base. They required a strong, stable monarchy in command of a strong army. If either or both were seriously disturbed, the economy would suffer, along with the civilization’s ease and brilliance. If, on the other hand, the political base could be restored, the health of the empire as a whole was not beyond recovery.

In the meantime, certain broad changes unconnected with the political and economic crisis were going forward in the 3rd century. Civilians increasingly complained of harassment and extortion by troops stationed among them; exaction of taxes intended for the army also became the target of more frequent complaint; and demands by soldiers to interfere in civilian government, foremost by those stationed in the capital, grew more [insolent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/insolent). The choice of emperor became more and more openly the [prerogative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prerogative) of the military, not the Senate; and, as mentioned, in the 260s senators were being largely displaced from high military commands. The equestrian rank, in which persons risen from military careers were often to be found, was the beneficiary of the new policy. In sum, the power of the military, high and low, was asserting itself against that of the civilians. From this change, further, there flowed certain cultural consequences; for, continuing the tendencies detectable even in the 1st century, the army was increasingly recruited from the most backward areas, above all, from the Danubian provinces. Here, too—indeed, throughout the whole northern glacis of the empire—it had been state policy to allow entire tribes of barbarians to immigrate and to settle on vacant lands, where they dwelled, farmed, paid taxes, and offered their sons to the army. Such immigrants, in increasingly large numbers from the reign of Marcus Aurelius on, produced, with the rural population, a very non-Romanized mix. From the midst of just such people, [Maximinus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maximinus) mounted to the throne in 235, and later, likewise, [Galerius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Galerius) (Caesar from 293). It is quite appropriate aesthetically, from Aurelian on, that these later 3rd-century rulers chose to present themselves to their subjects in their [propaganda](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/propaganda) with stubbly chin, set jaw, and close-cropped hair on a bullet head.

## The recovery of the empire and the establishment of the dominate (270–337)

## The Illyrian emperors

After Claudius II’s unexpected death, the empire was ruled from 270 to 284 by several “Illyrian” emperors, who were good generals and who tried in an energetic way to restore [equilibrium](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/equilibrium). The most remarkable was [Aurelian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aurelian). He first gained hard-won victories over the Alemanni and the Juthungi, who had invaded the Alpine provinces and northern Italy. To cheer the inhabitants of Rome, who had [succumbed](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/succumbed) to panic, he began construction of the famous rampart known as [Aurelian’s Wall](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Aurelian-Wall). And while crossing the Danubian provinces, before marching against Palmyra, he decided on an orderly evacuation of Dacia, an undefendable region that had been occupied by the barbarians since the time of Gallienus. In the East, he defeated Zenobia’s troops easily and occupied Palmyra in 272. Shortly afterward, an uprising broke out in Egypt under the instigation of a rich merchant, who, like a great part of the population, was a partisan of the Palmyrene queen. In response, Aurelian undertook a second campaign, plundering Palmyra and subjugating [Alexandria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Alexandria-Egypt). These troubles, however, along with the devastation of the great caravan city, were to set back Roman trade seriously in the East. Later, rounding back on the Gallic empire of Postumus’ successors, he easily defeated [Tetricus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaius-Pius-Esuvius-Tetricus), a peaceful man not very willing to fight, near Cabillonum. The unity of the empire was restored, and Aurelian celebrated a splendid triumph in Rome. He also reestablished [discipline](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discipline) in the state, sternly quelled a riot of artisans in the mints of Rome, organized the provisioning of the city by militarizing several corporations (the bakers, the pork merchants), and tried to stop the inflation by minting an antoninianus of sounder value. His religious policy was original: in [order](https://www.britannica.com/technology/order-architecture) to strengthen the [moral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moral) unity of the empire and his own power, he declared himself to be the protégé of the [Sol Invictus](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sol-Invictus) (the Invincible Sun) and built a magnificent temple for this god with the Palmyrene spoils. Aurelian was also sometimes officially called dominus et deus: the principate had definitely been succeeded by the “dominate.” In 275 Aurelian was murdered by certain officers who mistakenly believed that their lives were in danger.

For once, his successor, the aged senator [Tacitus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Tacitus-Roman-historian), was chosen by the Senate—at the army’s request and on short notice; he reigned only for a few months. After him, [Probus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Probus), another Illyrian general, inherited a fortified empire but had to fight hard in Gaul, where serious invasions occurred in 275–277. Thereafter, Probus devoted himself to economic restoration; he attempted to return abandoned farmland to cultivation and, with the aid of military labour, undertook works of improvement. To remedy the depopulation, he admitted to the empire, as had Aurelian, a great number of defeated Goths, Alemanni, and Franks and permitted them to settle on plots of land in Gaul and in the Danubian provinces. After the assassination of Probus in 282 by soldiers, [Carus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Carus) became emperor and immediately associated with himself his two sons, [Carinus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Carinus) and [Numerian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Numerian). Carus and Numerian fought a victorious campaign against the Persians but died under unknown circumstances. Carinus, left behind in the West, was later defeated and killed by [Diocletian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Diocletian), who was proclaimed emperor in November 284 by the army of the East.

# [Diocletian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Diocletian) of Ancient Rome

Diocletian may be considered the real founder of the late [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science), though the form of government he established—the [tetrarchy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/tetrarch-ancient-Greek-official), or four persons sharing power simultaneously—was transitory. His reforms, however, lasted longer. Military [exigencies](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/exigencies), not the desire to apply a preconceived system, explain the successive nomination of [Maximian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maximian) as Caesar and later as [Augustus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-Roman-emperor) in 286 and of [Constantius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Constantius-I) and Galerius as Caesars in 293. The tetrarchy was a collegium of emperors [comprising](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comprising) two groups: at its head, two Augusti, older men who made the decisions; and, in a secondary position, two Caesars, younger, with a more executive role. All four were related either by [adoption](https://www.britannica.com/topic/adoption-kinship) or by marriage, and all were Illyrians who had attained high commands after a long military career. Of the four, only Diocletian was a statesman. The unity of the empire was safeguarded, despite appearances, for there was no territorial partitioning. Each emperor received troops and a sector of operation: Maximian, [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy) and Africa; Constantius, [Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe) and Britain; Galerius, the Danubian countries; and Diocletian, the East. Practically all governmental decisions were made by Diocletian, from whom the others had received their power. He legislated, designated consuls, and retained [precedence](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/precedence). After 287 he declared his [kinship](https://www.britannica.com/topic/kinship) with the god [Jupiter](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jupiter-Roman-god) (Jove), who Diocletian claimed was his special protector. Diocletian, together with his Caesar Galerius, formed the “[Jovii](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jovii-dynasty)” [dynasty](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dynasty), whereas Maximian and Constantius, claiming descent from the mythical hero Hercules, formed the “[Herculii](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Herculii-dynasty).” This “Epiphany of the Tetrarchs” served as the divine foundation of the regime. The ideological recourse to two traditional Roman divinities represented a break with the Orientalizing attempts of [Elagabalus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Elagabalus) and [Aurelian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aurelian). Even though he honoured Mithra equally, Diocletian wanted to be seen as continuing the work of Augustus. In dividing power, Diocletian’s aim was to avoid usurpations, or at least to stifle them quickly—as in the attempt of [Carausius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Aurelius-Mausaeus-Carausius), chief of the army of Britain, who was killed (293), as was his successor, [Allectus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Allectus) (296), after a landing by Constantius.

The deification of the imperial function, marked by elaborate rituals, tended to set the emperors above the rest of mankind. But it was still necessary to avoid future rivalries and to assure the tetrarchy a [legitimate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/legitimate) and regular succession. Some time between 300 and 303 Diocletian found an original solution. After the anniversary of their 20-year reign the two Augusti [abdicated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/abdicated) (Maximian quite unwillingly), and on the same day (May 1, 305) the two Caesars became Augusti. Two new Caesars were chosen, [Severus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Severus) and [Maximinus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maximinus) Daia, both friends of Galerius, whose strong personality dominated Constantius. In [repudiating](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/repudiating) the principle of natural heredity (Maximian and Constantius each had an adult son), Diocletian took a great risk: absolute divine monarchy, which Diocletian largely established, implies the hereditary transmission of power, and the future was soon to demonstrate the attachment of the troops and even of the population to the hereditary principle.

In [order](https://www.britannica.com/technology/order-architecture) to create a more efficient unity between subjects and administrators, Diocletian multiplied the number of provinces; even Italy was divided into a dozen small units of the provincial type. [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome), moreover, was no longer the effective capital of the empire, each emperor having his own residence in the part of the empire over which he ruled (Trier, Milan, Sirmium, Nicomedia). Although a few provinces were still governed by senators (proconsuls or consuls), the majority were given to equestrian praesides, usually without any military power but with responsibility for the entirety of civil administration (justice, police, finances, and taxes). The cities lost their [autonomy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/autonomy), and the curiales administered and collected the taxes under the governor’s direct control. The breaking up of the provinces was compensated for by their regrouping into a dozen [dioceses](https://www.britannica.com/topic/diocese), under equestrian vicars who were responsible to the emperor alone. The two praetorian prefects had less military power but played an important role in legislative, judicial, and above all, financial matters: the administration of the annona, which had become the basis of the fiscal system, in fact gave them management of the entire economy. Within the central administration the number of offices increased, their managers being civilians who carried out their functions as a regular career. All officials were enrolled in the [*militia*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/militia), whose [hierarchy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hierarchy) was to be outlined during the 4th century.

Great efforts were devoted to strengthening the borders, and the limes were outfitted with fortresses (castella) and small forts (burgi), notably in [Syria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria). The army’s strength was increased to 60 legions (but with reduced personnel); and, in principle, each border [province](https://www.britannica.com/topic/province-ancient-Roman-government) received a garrison of two legions, complemented by subsidiary troops. Adopting one of [Gallienus’](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gallienus) ideas, Diocletian created an embryonic tactical army under the direct orders of the emperor whose escort (comitatus) it formed. The troops were most often commanded by duces and praepositi rather than by provincial governors and were mainly recruited from among the sons of soldiers and from barbarians who enlisted individually or by whole tribes. In addition, the landowners had to provide either recruits or a corresponding sum of money. All of these reforms were instituted gradually, during defensive wars whose success demonstrated the regime’s [efficiency](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/efficiency). Constantius put down Carausius’ attempted usurpation and fought the Alemanni fiercely near Basel; Maximian first hunted down the Bagaudae (gangs of fugitive peasant brigands) in Gaul, then fought the Moorish tribes in Africa, in 296–298, triumphing at Carthage; and on the Danube, Diocletian, and later Galerius, conquered the Bastarnae, the Iazyges, and the Carpi, deporting them in large numbers to the provinces. In the East, however, the opposition of the Persians, led by the enterprising [Narses](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Narses-king-of-Sasanian-empire), extended from [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt) to Armenia. The Persians incited uprisings by both the [Blemmyes](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Blemmyes) nomads in southern Egypt and the [Saracens](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Saracen) of the Syrian desert and made use of anti-Roman [propaganda](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/propaganda) by the Manichaeans and Jews. Diocletian succeeded in putting down the revolt in Egypt and fortified the south against the Blemmyes. But in 297, Narses, the heir to Shāpūr’s ambitions, precipitated a war by taking Armenia, Osroëne, and part of Syria. After an initial defeat, Galerius won a great victory over Narses, and in 298 the peace of Nisibis reinstated a Roman protégé in Armenia and gave the empire a part of Upper Mesopotamia that extended even beyond the Tigris. Peace was thus assured for some decades.

The wars, the reforms, and the increase in the number of officials were costly, and inflation reduced the resources of the state. The [*annona*](https://www.britannica.com/topic/annona), set up by [Septimius Severus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Septimius-Severus), had proved imperfect, and Diocletian now reformed it through the jugatio-capitatio system: henceforth, the land tax, paid in kind by all landowners, would be calculated by the [assessment](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/assessment) of fiscal units based on extent and quality of land, type of crops grown, number of settlers and cattle, and amount of equipment. The fiscal valuation of each piece of property, estimated in juga and capita (interchangeable terms whose use varied by region and period of time), required a number of declarations and censuses similar to those practiced long before in Egypt. Each year, the government established the rate of tax per fiscal unit; and every 15 years, beginning in 312, taxes were reassessed. This complicated system was not carried out uniformly in every region. Nevertheless, it resulted in an improved accounting of the empire’s resources and a certain progress in fiscal [equity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/equity), thus making the administration’s heavy demands less unbearable. In addition, Diocletian wished to reorganize the coinage and stabilize inflation. He thus minted improved sterling coins and fixed their value in relation to a [gold standard](https://www.britannica.com/topic/gold-standard). Nevertheless, inflation again became disturbing by the end of the century, and Diocletian proclaimed his well-known [Edictum de Maximis Pretiis](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Edictum-de-Maximis-Pretiis), fixing price ceilings for foodstuffs and for goods and services, which could not be exceeded under pain of death. The edict had indifferent results and was scarcely applied, but the inscriptions revealing it have great economic interest.

Diocletian’s reforms adumbrated the principal features of late Roman society: a society defined in all parts that could be useful to the state by laws fixing status and, through status, responsibility. The persons owning grain mills in Rome were (to anticipate developments that continued to unfold throughout the next two or three generations) responsible for the delivery of flour for the dole and could not [bequeath](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bequeath) or withdraw any part of their capital from their enterprise. Several other labour groups were similarly restricted, such as owners of seagoing vessels that served the supply of Rome, bargees in the Tiber, Ostian grain handlers, distributors of [olive oil](https://www.britannica.com/topic/olive-oil) and pork for the dole, [bath](https://www.britannica.com/technology/bath-plumbing) managers, and limeburners. A ban on moving to some other home or job along with production quotas were placed on people in trades serving state factories that made imperial court and army garments, cavalry equipment, and arms. Diocletian built a number of such factories, some in his capital Nicomedia, others in cities close to the groups whose needs they served. The laws imposing these obligations affected only labour groups serving the army and the capital (or capitals, plural, after the promotion of Constantinople); and, to identify them, induce them to serve, and hold them in their useful work, emperors as early as Claudius had offered privileges and imposed controls. Diocletian, however, greatly increased the weight and complexity of all these obligations.

Diocletian also changed the administrative districts in Egypt, in keeping with the model found elsewhere, by designating in each a central city to take responsibility for the whole. The last anomalous province was thus brought into line with the others. Everywhere, the imperial government continued to count on the members of the municipal senate to serve it, above all in tax collection but also in the supply of recruits, in rural police work, billeting for troops, or road building. As had been the case for centuries, they had to have a minimum of landed property to serve as surety for the performance of their administrative duties as well as to submit to nomination as senator, if it was so determined by the [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history). There had never been any one law to that effect, but by Diocletian’s time the emperor had at his command a body of long-established custom and numerous imperial decisions that served just as well. Local elites were thus hereditary, compulsory agents of his purpose, exactly like the Tiber bargees.

Two other groups were frozen into their roles in the same fashion: soldiers and farmers. The sons of soldiers were required to take up their fathers’ occupation (a law to that effect was in operation at least by 313); and the natural tendency of tenant farmers (coloni) to renew their lease on land that they, and perhaps their fathers and grandfathers, had worked was confirmed by imperial decisions—to such effect that, in 332, Constantine could speak of tenants on his Sardinian estates as bound to the acres they [cultivated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultivated). This is the earliest explicit pronouncement on what is called the “colonate.” Soon the institution was extended beyond imperial estates to tie certain categories of tenants to private estates as well. The emperors wanted to ensure tax revenue and, for that, a stable rural labour supply.

The empire, as it is seen in abundant legislation for the period of Diocletian and beyond into the 5th century, has been called a “military dictatorship” or even a sort of totalitarian prison, in which every inhabitant had his own cell and his own shackles. This may well have been the rulers’ intent. By their lights, such a system was needed to repair the weaknesses revealed in the 3rd-century crisis. The principle of hereditary obligations was not, after all, so very strange, set against the natural tendencies of the economy and the practices that had developed in earlier, easier times. Yet Diocletian’s intentions could not be fully realized, given the limits on governmental effectiveness.

After a period of initial indifference toward the Christians, Diocletian ended his reign by unleashing against them, in 303, the last and most violent of their persecutions. It was urged on him by his Caesar Galerius and prolonged in the East for a decade (until 311) by Galerius as Augustus and by other emperors. As in earlier persecutions, the [initiative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/initiative) arose at the heart of government; some emperors, as outraged by the Christians as many private citizens, considered it their duty to maintain harmony with the gods, the pax deorum, by which alone the empire flourished. Accordingly, [Decius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Decius) and [Valerian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Valerian-Roman-emperor) in the 250s had dealt severely with the Christians, requiring them to demonstrate their [apostasy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apostasy) by offering sacrifice at the local temples, and for the first time had directly struck the church’s clergy and property. There were scores of Christians who preferred death, though the great majority complied or hid themselves. Within a matter of months after he had begun his attacks, however, Decius had died (251), and the bloody phase of Valerian’s attacks also lasted only months (259/260). His son Gallienus had issued an edict of tolerance, and Aurelian was even appealed to by the church of [Antioch](https://www.britannica.com/place/Antioch-ancient-city-west-central-Turkey) to settle an internal dispute. Christianity had now become open and established, thanks to the power of its God so often, it seemed, [manifested](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manifested) in miraculous acts and to the firmness with which converts were secured in a new life and [community](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community). The older slanders—cannibalism and incest—that had troubled the Apologists in the 2nd century no longer commanded [credence](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/credence). A measure of respectability had been won, along with recruits from the upper classes and gifts of land and money. By the end of the 3rd century Christians actually predominated in some of the smaller Eastern towns or districts, and they were well represented in Italy, Gaul, and Africa around Carthage; all told, they numbered perhaps as many as 5 million out of the empire’s total population of 60 million. Occasional meetings on disputed matters might bring together dozens of bishops, and it was this institution or phenomenon that the Great Persecutions sought to defeat. The progress of a religion that could not accept the religious basis of the tetrarchy and certain of whose members were imprudent and provocative, as in the incidents at Nicomedia (where a church was built across from Diocletian’s palace), finally aroused Galerius’ fanaticism. In 303–304 several edicts, each increasingly stringent, ordered the destruction of the churches, the seizure of sacred books, the imprisonment of the clergy, and a sentence of death for all those who refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods. In the East, where Galerius was imposing his ideas more and more on the aging Diocletian, the persecution was extremely violent, especially in Egypt, Palestine, and the Danubian regions. In Italy, Maximian, [zealous](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/zealous) at the beginning, quickly tired; and in Gaul, Constantius merely destroyed a few churches without carrying reprisals any further. Nevertheless, Christianity could no longer be [eradicated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/eradicated), for the people of the empire and even some officials no longer felt the blind hatred for Christians that had typified previous centuries.

## Struggle for power

The first tetrarchy had ended on May 1, 305; the second did not last long. After Constantius died at Eboracum in 306, the armies of Britain and Gaul, without observing the rules of the tetrarchic system, had hastened to proclaim [Constantine](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Constantine-I-Roman-emperor), the young son of Constantius, as Augustus. Young [Maxentius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maxentius), the son of [Maximian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maximian) (who had never wanted to retire), thereupon had himself proclaimed in Rome, recalled his father into service, and got rid of Severus. Thus, in 307–308 there was great confusion. Seven emperors had, or pretended to have, the title of Augustus: Maximian, [Galerius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Galerius), Constantine, Maxentius, Maximinus [Daia](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Galerius-Valerius-Maximinus), [Licinius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Licinius) (who had been promoted Augustus in 308 by Galerius against Constantine), and, in Africa, the usurper Domitius Alexander.

This situation was clarified by successive eliminations. In 310, after numerous intrigues, old Maximian was killed by his son-in-law Constantine, and in the following year Alexander was slain by one of Maxentius’ praetorian prefects. In 311 Galerius died of illness a few days after having admitted the failure of his persecutions by proclaiming an edict of tolerance. There remained, in the West, Constantine and Maxentius and in the East, Licinius and Maximinus Daia. Constantine, the best general, invaded Italy with a strong army of faithful Gauls and defeated Maxentius near the [Milvian Bridge](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Battle-of-the-Milvian-Bridge), not far from Rome. While attempting to escape, Maxentius drowned. Constantine then made an agreement with Licinius, and the two rallied the Eastern Christians to their side by guaranteeing them religious tolerance in the [Edict of Milan](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Edict-of-Milan) (313). This left Maximinus Daia, now isolated and regarded as a persecutor, in a weak position; attacked by Licinius near Adrianople, he fell ill and died soon afterward, in 313. This left the empire with two leaders, Constantine and Licinius, allied in outward appearances and now brothers-in-law as a result of Licinius’ marriage to Constantine’s sister.

# The reign of [Constantine](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Constantine-I-Roman-emperor)

Constantine and [Licinius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Licinius) soon disputed among themselves for the [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science). Constantine attacked his adversary for the first time in 316, taking the dioceses of [Pannonia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pannonia) and [Moesia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Moesia) from him. A truce between them lasted 10 years. In 316 [Diocletian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Diocletian) died in Salona, which he had never felt a desire to leave despite the collapse of his political creation. Constantine and Licinius then reverted to the principles of heredity, designating three potential Caesars from among their respective sons, all still infants, with the intention of securing their [dynasties](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dynasties) (two sons of Constantine and one of Licinius). The dynastic concept, however, required the existence of only a single emperor, who imposed his own descendance. Although Constantine favoured the Christians, Licinius resumed the persecutions, and in 324 war erupted once again. Licinius, defeated first at Adrianople and then in Anatolia, was obliged to surrender and, together with his son, was executed. Next, Constantine’s third son, Constantius, was in turn named Caesar, as his two elder brothers, [Crispus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Crispus) and Constantine the Younger, had been some time before. The second [Flavian dynasty](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Flavian-dynasty) was thus founded, and Constantine let it be believed that his father, Flavius Constantius (Chlorus), was descended from Claudius Gothicus.

Constantine’s conversion to Christianity had a far-reaching effect. Like his father, he had originally been a votary of the Sun; worshiping at the Grand Temple of the Sun in the Vosges Mountains of [Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe), he had had his first vision—albeit a pagan one. During his campaign against [Maxentius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maxentius), he had had a second vision—a lighted cross in the sky—after which he had painted on his men’s shields a figure that was perhaps Christ’s monogram (although he probably had Christ confused with the Sun in his [manifestation](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/manifestation) as summa divinitas [“the highest divinity”]). After his victory he declared himself Christian. His conversion remains somewhat mysterious and his contemporaries—Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea—are scarcely [enlightening](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enlightening) and even rather contradictory on the subject. But it was doubtless a sincere conversion, for Constantine had a religious turn of mind. He was also progressive and greatly influenced by the capable bishops who surrounded him from the very beginning.

Until 320–322 solar symbols appeared on Constantine’s monuments and coins, and he was never a great theologian. Yet his favourable policy toward the Christians never faltered. Christianity was still a minority religion in the empire, especially in the West and in the countryside (and consequently within his own army), thus excluding the possibility of any political calculation on his part. But it was enthusiastically welcomed in the East, and thanks to Constantine the new religion triumphed more rapidly; his official support led to the conversion of numerous pagans, although with doubtful sincerity because they were indifferent in their [moral](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/moral) [conviction](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conviction).

The church, so recently persecuted, was now suddenly showered with favours: the construction of magnificent churches (Rome, Constantinople), donations and grants, exemptions from decurial duties for the clergy, juridical competences for the bishops, and exceptional promotions for Christian officials. Pagans were not persecuted, however, and Constantine retained the title of pontifex maximus. But he spoke of the pagan gods with [contempt](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/contempt) and forbade certain types of worship, principally nocturnal sacrifices. In 331 he ordered an inventory of pagan property, despoiled the temples of their treasure, and finally destroyed a few Eastern sanctuaries on the pretext of immorality.

The churches were soon to feel the burden of imperial solicitude: the “secular arm” (i.e., the government) was placed at the service of a fluctuating orthodoxy, for the emperor was impressionable to arguments of various coteries and became quite lost in theological subtleties. In 314 the [Council of Arles](https://www.britannica.com/event/Council-of-Arles) had tried in vain to stop the [Donatist](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Donatists) schism (a nationalistic heretical movement questioning the worthiness of certain church officials) that arose in Africa after Diocletian’s persecutions. The [Arian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Arianism) heresy raised even more difficulties: [Arius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Arius), an Alexandrian priest and [disciple](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disciple) of Lucian of [Antioch](https://www.britannica.com/place/Antioch-ancient-city-west-central-Turkey), questioned the [dogma](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dogma) of the Trinity and of the Godhead of Christ, and his asceticism, as well as the sharpness of his dialectics, brought him many followers; he was convicted several times, but the disorders continued. Constantine, solicited by both sides and untroubled by doctrinal [nuances](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/nuances) that were, moreover, foreign to most believers in the West, wished to institute a universal creed; with this in mind he [convened](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/convened) the general [Council of Nicaea](https://www.britannica.com/event/First-Council-of-Nicaea-325), or Nicene Council, in 325. He condemned Arius and declared, in spite of the Easterners, that Jesus was “of one substance” with God the Father. Nevertheless, the heresy continued to exist, for Constantine changed his mind several times; he was influenced by Arian or semi-Arian bishops and was even baptized on his deathbed, in 337, by one of them, [Eusebius of Nicomedia](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Eusebius-of-Nicomedia).

Between 325 and 337 Constantine effected important reforms, continuing Diocletian’s work. The division between the limitanei border troops and the tactical troops (comitatenses and imperial guard) led by magistri militum was clarified, and military careers became independent of civil careers. At the same time, however, he lodged an increasing number of troops in or next to cities, a process whose objective was ease and economy of supply; however, training and [discipline](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discipline) were harder to enforce because of it, and the men hung about in idleness. It was also under Constantine that a [barbarian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/barbarian) commander in the Roman army attained a historical significance. He was Crocus the Alaman, who led the movement among the troops that resulted in Constantine’s seizure of the rank of [Augustus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-Roman-emperor) in 306 immediately after his father Constantius’ death. A similar figure was the great commander Bonitus, a [Frank](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Frank-people), in the years 316–324; and Constantine credited his victories against Maxentius in 311–312 principally to his barbarian troops, who were honoured on the triumphal [Arch of Constantine](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Arch-of-Constantine) in [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome). In opposition to him, Licinius mustered drafts of Goths to strengthen his army. Goths were also brought in by Constantine, to the number of 40,000, it is said, to help defend Constantinople in the latter part of his reign, and the palace guard was thenceforward composed mostly of Germans, from among whom a great many high army commands were filled. Dependence on immigrants or first-generation barbarians in war was to increase steadily, at a time when conventional Roman troops were losing military value.

Constantine raised many equestrians to senatorial rank, having in his earlier reign the still rapidly increasing ranks of the [civil service](https://www.britannica.com/topic/civil-service) to fill—it was at least 50 times the size of the civil service under Caracalla—and having in his later reign a second senate to fill, in Constantinople (see below). A rapid inflation in titles of honour also took place. As a result of these several changes, the equestrian [order](https://www.britannica.com/technology/order-architecture) ceased to have meaning, and a new nobility of imperial service developed. Constantine gave first rank in the central administration to the palace [quaestor](https://www.britannica.com/topic/quaestor-ancient-Roman-official), the magister officiorum, and the counts of finance (comes sacrarum largitionum, comes rei privatae). The diocesan vicars were made responsible to the praetorian prefects, whose number was increased and whose jurisdictions were now vast territories: the prefectures of Gaul, Italy, Illyricum, and the East. The unification of political power brought with it a corresponding decentralization of administration.

In order to reorganize finances and currency, Constantine minted two new coins: the silver miliarensis and, most importantly, the gold [solidus](https://www.britannica.com/topic/solidus-Byzantine-coin), whose stability was to make it the [Byzantine](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Byzantine) Empire’s basic currency. And by plundering Licinius’ treasury and despoiling the pagan temples, he was able to restore the finances of the state. Even so, he still had to create class taxes: the gleba for senators, and the chrysargyre, which was levied in gold and silver on merchants and craftsmen in the towns.

Constantine’s immortality, however, rests on his founding of Constantinople. This “New Rome,” established in 324 on the site of [Byzantium](https://www.britannica.com/place/Istanbul) and dedicated in 330, rapidly increased in population as a result of favours granted to immigrants. A large number of churches were also built there, even though former temples were not destroyed; and the city became the administrative capital of the empire, receiving a senate and proconsul. This choice of site was due not to religious considerations, as has been suggested, but rather to reasons that were both strategic (its proximity to the Danube and Euphrates frontiers) and economic (the importance of the straits and of the junction between the great continental road, which went from Boulogne to the [Black Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Black-Sea), and the eastern commercial routes, passing through Anatolia to Antioch and Alexandria). Constantine died on May 22, 337.

## The Roman Empire under the 4th-century successors of Constantine

## The rule of Constantine’s sons

After some months of confusion, Constantine’s three surviving sons (Crispus, the eldest son, had been executed in mysterious circumstances in 326), supported by the armies faithful to their father’s memory, divided the empire among themselves and had all the other members of their [family](https://www.britannica.com/topic/family-kinship) killed. [Constantine II](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Constantine-II-antipope) kept the West, [Constantius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Constantius-II) the East, and [Constans](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Constans-I), the youngest brother, received the central prefecture ([Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy), [Africa](https://www.britannica.com/place/Africa), and Illyricum). In 340 Constantine II tried to take this away from Constans but was killed. For the next 10 years there was peace between the two remaining brothers, and Constans won acceptance for a religious policy favourable to the Nicaeans, whose leader, [Athanasius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Athanasius), had received a triumph in [Alexandria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Alexandria-Egypt). In 350 a mutiny broke out in Autun; Constans fled but was killed in Lugdunum by [Magnentius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Magnentius), a usurper who was recognized in Gaul, Africa, and Italy. Constantius went out to engage Magnentius, and the [Battle of Mursa](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Mursa) (351) left the two strongest armies of the empire—those of Gaul and of the Danube—massacred, thus compromising the empire’s defense. Magnentius retreated after his defeat and finally committed suicide in 353.

Thenceforth, Constantius reigned alone as Augustus, aided by a meddlesome [bureaucracy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/bureaucracy) in which mission deputies (agentes in rebus), informers, and spies played an important role. He named two Caesars in succession, his two young surviving cousins, [Gallus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gallus-Caesar) in the East and [Julian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julian-Roman-emperor) in Gaul. Constantius eventually had to get rid of Gallus, who proved incompetent and cruel and soon terrorized Antioch. Julian, however, was a magnificent success, a fact that aroused Constantius’ jealousy and led to Julian’s usurpation; for the latter was proclaimed Augustus, in spite of Constantius’ opposition, at Lutetia in 361. Civil war was averted when Constantius died in November 361, leaving the empire to Julian, the last ruler of the Constantinian family.

At the time of his death in 337 Constantine had been preparing to go to war against the Persians. This [legacy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/legacy) weighed heavily on the shoulders of Constantius, a military incompetent when compared to the energetic Sāsānian king [Shāpūr II](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Shapur-II). Nearly every year the Persians attacked and pillaged Roman territory; the Mesopotamian towns were besieged, and Nisibis alone resisted. There was a lull between 350 and 357, while Shāpūr was detained by troubles in the eastern regions of his own kingdom. The war resumed, however, and Mesopotamia was partly lost when the emperor had to leave in order to fight Julian. Constantius had fought Shāpūr conscientiously, but his generals were [mediocre](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mediocre), except for Urisicinus, and he himself was clumsy. In the meantime, the Rhine and Danube were threatened frequently, because the troops had been withdrawn from there and sent to the East. Constantius, moreover, had made a mistake in sending Chnodomar, the Alemannic king, against Magnentius in 351, for his tribes had gone on to ravage Gaul. Julian, however, soon revealed himself to be a great military leader by winning several well-fought campaigns between 356 and 361, most notably at Strasbourg in 357, and by restoring approximately 70 plundered villages. His abandonment, in 358, of the district of Toxandria, roughly equivalent to modern Belgium, to its barbarian squatters, on condition of their defending it against other invaders, was no doubt a realistic decision. Constantius defeated the Quadi and the Goths on the Danube in 359, but court intrigues, Magnentius’ usurpation, and the interminable war against the Persians allowed the barbarians to wreak great havoc.

Constantius was primarily interested in religious affairs. His interventions created a “caesaro-papism” that was unfavourable to the church, for after the Battle of Mursa the emperor had become violently Arian. The Christological problem had moved to the forefront. In 360 Constantius obtained a new creed by force from the [Council of Constantinople](https://www.britannica.com/event/Fourth-Council-of-Constantinople-869-870), which, rejecting the notion of “substance” as too risky, declared only that the Son was like the Father and thus left the problem unresolved. Pagans as well as orthodox Nicaeans (Homoousians) and extremist Arians (Anomoeans) were persecuted, for in 356–357 several edicts proscribed magic, divination, and sacrifices and ordered that the temples be closed. But when Constantius visited Rome in 357, he was so struck by its pagan grandeur that he apparently suspended the application of these measures.

## The reign of Julian

Julian, who had been spared because of his tender age from the family butchering in 337, had been brought up far from the court and was undoubtedly intended for the priesthood. Nevertheless, he had been allowed to take courses in [rhetoric](https://www.britannica.com/topic/rhetoric) and philosophy at Ephesus and later at Athens; he developed a fondness for Hellenic literature, and he secretly apostatized around 351. When he became sole emperor at the end of 361, he proclaimed his pagan faith, ordered the restitution of the temples seized under Constantius, and freed all the bishops who had been banished by the Arians, so as to weaken Christianity through the resumption of doctrinal disputes. The religion he himself espoused was [compounded](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compounded) of traditional non-Christian elements of piety and theology, such as might have been found in any fairly [intellectual](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intellectual) person in the preceding centuries, along with elements of Neoplatonism developed by Porphyry and [Iamblichus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Iamblichus) of two or three generations earlier, and, finally, much of the organization and social [ethic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethic) of the church. From Neoplatonism he learned the techniques of direct communication with the gods (theurgy) through prayer and invocation; from the church he adopted, as the church itself had adopted from the empire’s civil organization, a [hierarchy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hierarchy) of powers: provincial, metropolitan, urban, with himself as supreme pontiff. His deep love of traditional higher [culture](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture), moreover, provoked his war on Christian [intellectuals](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intellectuals) and teachers who, he protested, had no right to Homer or Plato. Many Christians both before and later [concurred](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/concurred) with him, being themselves troubled by the relation between Christianity and inherited literature and thought, steeped as both were in pagan beliefs.

In the latter part of his 18-month reign, Julian forbade Christians from teaching, began the rebuilding of the Temple at Jerusalem, restored many pagan shrines, and displayed an exaggerated piety. Whereas Constantine (and his sons to a lesser degree) had introduced a huge number of coreligionists into the upper ranks of the army and government, achieving a rough parity between the members of the two religions, Julian began to reverse the process. Within a short while Julian was successful enough in his undertaking to have aroused the fear and hatred of the Christians, who for a long time thought of him as the Antichrist.

In the political realm, Julian wished to return to the liberal principate of the Antonines—to a time before the reforms of Diocletian and Constantine, whom he detested. He put an end to the terrorism of Constantius’ eunuchs and agentes in rebus and reduced the personnel and expenditures of the court, while he himself lived like an [ascetic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ascetic). In the provinces he lightened the financial burden on individuals by reducing the capitatio, and on cities, by reducing the aurum coronarium and restoring the municipal properties confiscated by Constantius. On the other hand, he increased the number of curiales by reinstating numerous clerks in an attempt to return the ancient lustre to municipal life. Thus, he earned the gratitude of pagan intellectuals, who were enamoured of the past of free Greece; and Ammianus made him the central hero of his history.

Taking up [Trajan’s](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Trajan) dream, Julian wished to defeat Persia definitively by engaging the empire’s forces in an offensive war that would [facilitate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/facilitate) a national reconciliation around the gods of paganism. But his army was weak—corrupted perhaps by large numbers of hostile Christians. After a brilliant beginning, he was defeated near [Ctesiphon](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ctesiphon-ancient-city-Iraq) and had to retrace his steps painfully; he was killed in an obscure encounter on June 26, 363.

Julian’s successor, [Jovian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jovian), chosen by the army’s [general staff](https://www.britannica.com/topic/general-staff), was a Christian, but not a fanatic. He negotiated a peace with Shāpūr, by which Rome lost a good part of Galerian’s conquests of 298 (including [Nisibis](https://www.britannica.com/place/Nusaybin), which had not surrendered) and abandoned Armenia. He also restored tolerance in religious affairs, for he neither espoused any of the heresies nor persecuted pagans. In February 364 he died accidentally.

# The reign of [Valentinian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Valentinian-I) and Valens

Once again the [general staff](https://www.britannica.com/topic/general-staff) unanimously chose a Pannonian officer—Valentinian, an energetic patriot and, like [Jovian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jovian), a moderate Christian—but he had to yield to the rivalry of the armies by dividing authority. Taking the West for himself, Valentinian entrusted the East to his brother [Valens](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Valens), an inexperienced man whom he raised to the rank of [Augustus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-Roman-emperor). For the first time the two parts of the [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science) were truly separate, except for the selection of consuls, in which Valentinian had [precedence](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/precedence).

Although he served the state with dedication, Valentinian could be brutal, choleric, and [authoritarian](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/authoritarian). His [foreign policy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/foreign-policy) was excellent: all the while he was fighting barbarians (the Alemanni in [Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe), the Sarmatians and Quadi in Pannonia) and putting down revolts in Britain and Africa (notably that of the Berber Firmus) with the aid of his top general, Theodosius the Elder, he was taking care to improve the army’s equipment and to protect Gaul by creating a brilliant fortification. His domestic measures favoured the curiales and the lower classes: from then on, taxes would be collected exclusively by officials; the protection of the poor was entrusted to “defenders of the plebs,” chosen from among retired high officials (honorati). Nevertheless, needs of state obliged him to accentuate social immobility, to reinforce corporation [discipline](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/discipline) and official hierarchization, and to demand taxes ruthlessly. At first he was [benevolent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/benevolent) to the [Senate](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Senate-Roman-history) of [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome), supervised the provisioning of the city, and legislated in favour of its university, the nursery of officials (law of 370). But beginning in 369, under the influence of Maximin, the [prefect](https://www.britannica.com/topic/prefect-ancient-Roman-official) of Gaul, he initiated a period of terror, which struck the great senatorial families. Meanwhile, religious peace reigned in the West, tolerance was proclaimed, and after some difficulty, Rome found a great pope in [Damasus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Damasus-I), who, beginning in 373, actively supported the new bishop of Milan, St. [Ambrose](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Ambrose), an [ardent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ardent) defender of orthodoxy.

In the East, Valens, who was incapable and suspicious, had fallen under the influence of legists, such as the praetorian prefect Modestus. The beginning of Valens’ reign was shadowed by the attempted usurpation of Procopius (365–366), a pagan relative of Julian’s who failed and was killed by the army, which remained faithful to Valens. Modestus instituted harsh persecutions in [Antioch](https://www.britannica.com/place/Antioch-ancient-city-west-central-Turkey) of the educated pagan elite. Valens was a fanatic Arian, who exiled even moderate Nicaean bishops and granted to Arians favours that aroused violent reactions from the orthodox, whose power had increased in the East. Valens’ policies made the East prey to violent religious passions.

On the Danube, Valens fought the Visigoths and made a treaty with their king, [Athanaric](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Athanaric), in 369; but in 375 the Ostrogoths and the Greutingi appeared on the frontiers, pushed from their home in southern Russia by the powerful [Huns](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hun-people). In 376 Valens authorized the starving masses to enter Thrace; but, being exploited and mistreated by the officials, they soon turned to uncontrollable pillaging. Their numbers continually increased by the addition of new bands, until finally they threatened Constantinople itself. Valens sent for aid from the West, but without waiting for it to arrive he joined battle and was killed in the [Adrianople disaster of](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Adrianople-378) 378, which to some critics foreshadowed the approaching fall of the Roman Empire.

The Goths, who were also stirring up [Thrace](https://www.britannica.com/place/Thrace) and Macedonia, could no longer be driven out. The provinces subject to their pillaging soon included [Pannonia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Pannonia) farther up the Danube, where Gratian agreed with a cluster of three tribal armies to settle them as a unit under their own chiefs on vacant lands (380). By a far more significant arrangement of the same sort two years later, Theodosius assigned to the Goths a large area of Thrace along the Danube as, in effect, their own kingdom; there they enjoyed [autonomy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/autonomy) as well as a handsome subsidy from the emperor, exactly as tribes beyond the empire had done in previous treaties. They were expected to respond to calls on their manpower if the Roman army needed supplementing, as it routinely did. Although the Goths considered this treaty ended with Theodosius’ death and resumed their lawless wanderings for a while, it nevertheless represented the model for subsequent ones, again struck with the Goths under their king Alaric (from 395; see below) and with later [barbarian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/barbarian) tribes. The capture of the empire had begun.

## The reign of [Gratian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gratian-Roman-emperor) and Theodosius I

Following Valentinian’s sudden death in 375, the West was governed by his son Gratian, then 16 years old, who had been given the title of Augustus as early as 367. The Pannonian army, rife with intrigue, quickly proclaimed Gratian’s half-brother, [Valentinian II](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Valentinian-II), only four years old. The latter received Illyricum under his older brother’s guardianship, and this arrangement satisfied everybody. Valentinian’s advisers were executed: [Maximian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maximian) was sacrificed to the spite of the Senate, and Theodosius the Elder became the victim of personal jealousies. Gratian announced a liberal principate, supported in Gaul by the wealthy [family](https://www.britannica.com/topic/family-kinship) of the Bordeaux poet [Ausonius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Decimus-Magnus-Ausonius) and in Rome by the Symmachi and the Nicomachi Flaviani, representatives of the pagan [aristocracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aristocracy). His generals defeated the Alemanni and the Goths on the Danube but arrived too late to save Valens.

On January 19, 379, before the army, Gratian proclaimed [Theodosius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Theodosius-I), the son of the recently executed general, as Eastern emperor. Theodosius was chosen for his military ability and for his orthodoxy (Gratian, extremely pious, had come under the influence of Damasus and Ambrose). The East was enlarged by the dioceses of [Dacia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Dacia) and Macedonia, taken from Valentinian II. Gratian and Theodosius agreed to admit the Goths into the empire, and Gratian applied the policy also to the Salian Franks in [Germany](https://www.britannica.com/place/Germany). Theodosius soon dominated his weak colleague and entered the battle for the triumph of orthodoxy. In 380 the Arians were relieved of their churches in Constantinople, and in 381 the Nicaean faith was universally imposed by a council whose canons established the authority of the metropolitan bishops over their dioceses and gave the bishop of the capital a primacy similar to that of the [bishop of Rome](https://www.britannica.com/topic/papacy).

In [ecclesiastical](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ecclesiastical) affairs, the separation between East and West was codified. The Westerners bowed to this policy, satisfied with the triumph of orthodoxy. Gratian then permitted Ambrose and Damasus to deal harshly with the Arians, with the support of the state. Paganism also was hounded: following Theodosius’ lead, Gratian refused the chief priesthood, removed the altar of Victory from the hall of the Roman Senate, and deprived the pagan priests and the [Vestal Virgins](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vestal-Virgins) of their subsidies and privileges. The pagan senators were outraged, but their protests were [futile](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/futile) because Gratian was watched over by Ambrose.

This militantly orthodox policy aroused the displeasure of the pagans and of the Western Arians: thus, when Gratian left Trier for Milan, the army of Gaul and Britain proclaimed its leader, [Maximus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Magnus-Maximus), in 383. He conquered Gaul without difficulty, and Gratian was killed in Lyons. Maximus, who, like Theodosius, was Spanish and extremely orthodox, was recognized by the latter. In the meantime, the third Augustus, Valentinian II, had taken refuge in Milan after suffering defeat in Pannonia. He was effectively under the domination of his mother, Justina, an Arian who sought support for her son among the Arians and pagans of Rome and even among the African [Donatists](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Donatists) (a Christian heresy). In 388 Maximus, after arriving in [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy), first expelled Valentinian and then prepared to attack Theodosius. The latter, accepting the inevitability of war, strengthened his resolve and gained several victories. Maximus was killed at [Aquileia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Aquileia) in 388, and thenceforth Theodosius ruled both West and East; he was represented in the East by his son [Arcadius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Arcadius), an Augustus since 383. Valentinian II was sent to Trier, accompanied by the Frankish general Arbogast to control him.

After a few years’ respite, during the prefectureships of Nicomachus Flavianus in Rome and Tatian in the East, paganism waged its last fight: Theodosius, influenced by Ambrose, who had dared to inflict public penance on him in 390 after the massacre at Thessalonica, had determined to eliminate the pagans completely. After a few hostile clashes, the law of November 8, 392, proscribed the pagan religion. Then [Arbogast](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Arbogast), after Valentinian II’s death in 392 under shadowy circumstances, proclaimed as emperor the rhetorician [Eugenius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Eugenius). When Theodosius refused to recognize him, Eugenius was thrown into the arms of the pagans of Rome. But this last “pagan reaction” was short-lived; in 394, with his victory at the [Frigidus](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Battle-of-Frigidus-River) (modern Vipacco) River, between Aquileia and Emona, Theodosius put an end to the hopes of Eugenius and his followers. His intention was to place his son [Honorius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Honorius-Roman-emperor), proclaimed Augustus in 393, over the West, while returning his eldest son, Arcadius, to the East. But Theodosius’ sudden death in January 395 precipitated the division of the empire.

Theodosius had successfully dealt with the danger of the Goths, although not without taking risks, and had both established a [dynasty](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dynasty) and imposed the strictest orthodoxy. A compromise peace with the Persians had given Rome, in 387, a small section of Armenia, where he had founded Theodosiopolis ([Erzurum](https://www.britannica.com/place/Erzurum)). He had survived two pretenders in the West. These military successes were, however, won with armies in which barbarians were in the majority, which was not a good sign. The barbarian presence is reflected in the names of his commanding officers, including such Franks as Richomer, Merovech, and Arbogast, and the half-Vandal [Stilicho](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Flavius-Stilicho), who through his marriage to Serena, Theodosius’ niece, had entered the imperial family.

## Social and economic conditions

During the 4th century the emperor’s power was theoretically absolute, the traditions of the principate having given way to the necessities of defense.

The emperor was both heir to the Hellenistic basileus (absolute king) and the anointed of the deity. Pagans and Christians alike considered him “emperor by the grace of God,” which, strictly speaking, rendered the imperial cult unnecessary. Indeed, he hardly needed the ceremonies and parade of god-awfulness with which [Diocletian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Diocletian) and his successors were surrounded. Yet imperial authority had actually lost much of its effectiveness due to the growth and nature of late Roman government. Its ranks can be estimated at more than 30,000 men—perhaps an insignificant number compared with that of modern governments but gigantic when set against the total of only a few hundred a century earlier. The problem, however, lay not in numbers but in the assumption, held throughout both [bureaucracy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/bureaucracy) and army, that a position of power ex officio entitled the holder to a rake-off of some sort, to be extracted both from the citizenry with whom he came in contact and from fellow members of the service in ranks below his own. This [ethos](https://www.britannica.com/art/ethos) was not new; but during the principate it had been restrained by higher officers and officials, who operated according to a different, essentially aristocratic, code expressed in patron-dependent relations and mutuality. Its currency was not money but favours and services. Such a code was swept away by the rapid increase in the size of government in the later 3rd century and the rise to high civil and military posts by men recruited from the ranks rather than from the upper classes. As they had bought their own promotions or appointments, so they expected to recoup their expenses (and more besides) by such means as selling exemptions and extortion. The more intrusive and demanding the military tax collection or the state’s control of the rosters of city senates, the more profit there was for a pervasively corrupt administration. Persons close to the emperor could, for a price, generally screen him from knowledge of what was going on. [Constantine](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Constantine-Roman-emperor), for example, complained quite in vain—and the complaint was endlessly repeated by his successors—that the city senates were being “emptied of persons obligated to them by birth, who yet are asking for a government post by petition to the emperor, running off to the legions or various civil offices.” Such posts could easily be bought. A great deal of imperial planning was thus vitiated by sale. Many of the profiteers started life in the urban upper classes, but, as nouveaux riches, they joined the older landed nobility after a term in the emperor’s service.

In a few areas where measurement is possible, one can see that a process of consolidation of landownership had been going on for a long time, bringing the rural population increasingly into dependence on the larger property holders. Diocletian’s new system of property [assessment](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/assessment) accelerated this process; it was more thorough and thus exposed the poor and ignorant to exploitation by local officialdom. In response, they sought the protection of some influential man to ward off unfair [assessments](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/assessments), selling their land to him and becoming his tenants. In areas disturbed by lawlessness, a large landowner offered them safety as well. The strength of rural magnates in their [formidable](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/formidable), even fortified, dwellings, with a dependent peasantry of 100 or even 1,000 around them made much trouble for tax collectors, and landowners thus became the target of many laws. Consolidation of ownership, however, was not apparent in northern Africa, and the reverse process has been established for a carefully researched area of [Syria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria).

Regional differences cannot be disregarded. They were responsible for guiding the development of the later empire along quite varied paths. The archaeological data, which reflect these developments most clearly, register such changes as the degree of wealth in public buildings and the use and elegance of carved sarcophagi or of mosaics in private houses. Broadly speaking, a decline is noticeable throughout the European provinces; it tends to affect the cities earlier than the rural areas and is detectable sometimes by 350, generally by 375. In the Danube provinces, the evidence fits neatly with political history following the [Battle of Adrianople](https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Adrianople-378) in 378, after which their condition was continually disturbed by the Visigothic immigrants. There is, however, no such obvious explanation for areas such as Spain or central Gaul. Italy of the 3rd and 4th centuries was not perceptibly worse off than before, though wealth in the Po region was more concentrated in the cities north of the river. Northern Africa seems to have maintained nearly the same level of prosperity as in earlier centuries, if proper weight is given to ecclesiastical building after Constantine. For [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt), no clear picture emerges; but all the other Eastern provinces enjoyed in the later empire the same level of economic well-being as before or a still higher one, with more disposable wealth and an increasing population. These conditions continued into the 5th century.

The vast differences between the European and the Eastern provinces are best explained by the shifting focus of imperial energies. It can be traced in the locus of heaviest military recruitment, in the lower Danube, as the 3rd century progressed; in the consequent concentration of military expenditure there; and in the siting of the emperors’ residence as it was moved from Rome to Milan in the 260s, then to the lower Danube later in the 3rd century (where much fighting occurred), and subsequently to Nicomedia (Diocletian’s capital). None of the Tetrarchs chose Rome—its days as the imperial centre were over—and when, from among various Eastern cities he considered, Constantine decided on [Byzantium](https://www.britannica.com/place/Byzantine-Empire) as his permanent residence, he simply made permanent a very long-term development. Meanwhile the Rhine frontier and the upper Danube were repeatedly overrun. As can be inferred from the signs of fortification in Pannonia, Gaul, Britain, and Spain, internal policing was neglected. Commercial intercourse, which had been the key to raising the economy and the level of urbanization, became less safe and easy. Villas turned into self-sufficient villages, and the smaller towns also reverted to villages. Only the larger towns, such as Bordeaux, Arles, or Cartagena, maintained their vitality.

Although there was considerable inflation (culminating under Theodosius), in spite of a deflationary [fiscal policy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/fiscal-policy), commercial transactions ignored [barter](https://www.britannica.com/topic/barter-trade) and were based instead on currency throughout the empire at the end of the century. The economy was partially under state direction, which was applied to agriculture through bias toward the settler system on imperial estates and to industry through the requisitioning of corporations (artisans, merchants, carriers) and the creation of state workshops (especially for manufacturing military goods). Opinions differ on the intensity of trade, but there was certainly clear progress in comparison to the 3rd century.

## The remnants of pagan culture

The spread of Christianity in no way harmed the flourishing of pagan literature. Instruction in the universities (Rome, Milan, [Carthage](https://www.britannica.com/place/Carthage-ancient-city-Tunisia), Bordeaux, Athens, Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria) was still based on [rhetoric](https://www.britannica.com/topic/rhetoric), and literature received the support of senatorial circles, especially in Rome (for example those of the Symmachi and the Nicomachi Flaviani). [Latin literature](https://www.britannica.com/art/Latin-literature) was represented by [Symmachus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Quintus-Aurelius-Memmius-Eusebius-Symmachus) and the poet [Ausonius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Decimus-Magnus-Ausonius). The last great historian of Rome was [Ammianus Marcellinus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ammianus-Marcellinus), a Greek who wrote in Latin for the Roman aristocracy; of his Res gestae, the most completely preserved part describes the period from 353 to 378. The works of Sextus Aurelius Victor and Eutropius, who ably abridged earlier historical works, are fairly accurate and more reliable than the Scriptores historiae Augustae, a collection of imperial biographies of unequal value, undoubtedly composed under Theodosius but for an unknown purpose. Erudition was greatly prized in aristocratic circles, which, enamoured of the past, studied and commented on the classic authors (Virgil) or the ancestral rites (the Saturnalia of Macrobius). [Greek literature](https://www.britannica.com/art/Greek-literature) is represented by the works of philosophers or sophists: [Themistius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Themistius), a political theoretician who advocated absolutism; [Himerius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Himerius) of Prusias; and above all [Libanius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Libanius) of Antioch, whose correspondence and political discourses from the Theodosian period bear witness to his perspicacity and, often, to his courage.

# The Christian church

In the last decade of the 4th century the harsh laws against the perpetuation of the old pieties [promulgated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/promulgated) by Theodosius gave [impetus](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/impetus) and justification to waves of icon and temple destruction, especially in the East. It is, nonetheless, likely that a majority of the population was still non-Christian in 400, although less so in the cities and in the East and more so in rural and mountainous areas and the West. Efforts by the church to reach them were [intermittent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intermittent) and lacked energy. Bishops generally expected rural magnates to do their job for them; and the church leadership was, in any case, of a [social class](https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-class) that viewed the peasantry from a great distance and wanted to keep it that way. Except by such unusual figures as [Martin of Tours](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Martin-of-Tours) or Marcellus of Apamea, little effort was made to convert people who were hard to reach. As always in antiquity, it was in the cities where changes occurred—with the exception of monasticism.

Only in the reign of [Constantine](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Constantine-Roman-emperor), and about simultaneously in [Egypt](https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt) and Palestine, had monasticism, a religious movement whose followers lived as hermits and pursued a life of extreme asceticism, become more than the little-regarded choice of rare [zealots](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/zealots). Near Gaza and in the desert along the eastern side of Jerusalem a number of tiny clusters of cells had been made from caves and taken as residence by [ascetics](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ascetics), from whose fame and example that way of life later spread to many other corners of the Levant. The bishop of Jerusalem, Cyril, by mid-century could speak of “regiments of monks.” But it was in the desert on both sides of the Nile that similar [ascetic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ascetic) experiments of much greater importance were made, by the hero of the movement, St. Anthony, and others. True monasticism, tempered only by weekly communal worship and organizing, established itself on Anthony’s model and under his inspiration in the first decade of the 4th century; it took root above all in the desert of Scete just west of the base of the Nile delta. Coenobitism, joint life in enclosed [communities](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/communities), was the model preferred by St. Pachomius around 330, vigorously directed and diffused by him until mid-century, when both he and Anthony died. [Basil of Caesarea](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Basil-the-Great) was to establish monastic communities in [Cappadocia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cappadocia) under the influence of what he saw in Egypt on his visit there in the year of Anthony’s death; and Athanasius was shortly to write a biography of that saint of enormous influence and to carry word of his life to [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy) and [Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe) during his own exile there. The biography was soon translated into Latin and inspired a scattering of experiments in asceticism or coenobitism in the West—in Vercellae in Italy, for example, by 330, and at Tours in the 370s under Martin’s direction. Tours became the first monastery in the West comparable to those in the East, but development subsequently was slow compared to the 10,000 or more monasteries founded in Egypt by 400.

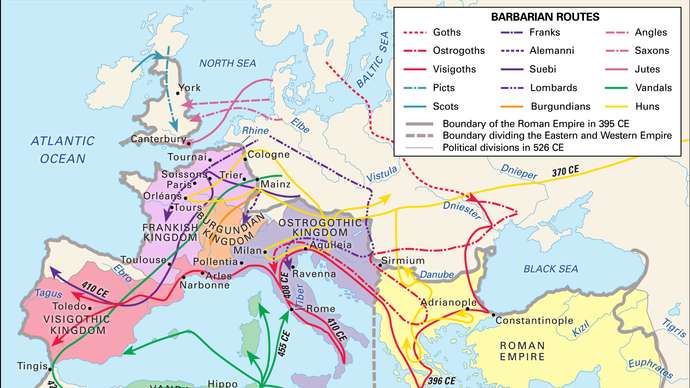
The most distinct and well-reported phenomenon during the century after the conversion of Constantine was the continued religious rioting and harrying in the cities, both in all the major ones and in dozens of minor ones. The death toll exceeded the toll among Christians at the hands of pagans in earlier persecutions. It was rarely of Jews or pagans at the hands of Christians or of Christians at the hands of pagans, but ordinarily of Christians at each others’ hands in the course of sectarian strife. For a time, no one sect enjoyed a majority among Homoousians, Arians, Donatists, Meletians, and many others. Bishoprics were fiercely contested and appeals often made to armed coercion. The emperors had assumed the right to interfere and often did so; but under Theodosius, Pope [Damasus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Damasus-I) and St. Ambrose reacted: the state was to restrict itself to furnishing the “secular arm,” while the church, in the name of evangelical [ethics](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethics), claimed the right to judge the emperors, a policy that had grave [implications](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/implications) for the future. The [“caesaro-papism”](https://www.britannica.com/topic/caesaropapism)of Constantius later gained adherents under the [Byzantine](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Byzantine) emperors. In the meantime, the Goths had been converted to Arianism by [Ulfilas](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ulfilas) during the period of Constantius and [Valens](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Valens), thus presaging conflicts that were to come after the great invasions. Orthodox missionaries had converted Osroëne, Armenia, and even some countries on the [Red Sea](https://www.britannica.com/place/Red-Sea).

The Christian literature of the 4th century is remarkable. Its first representative is [Eusebius of Caesarea](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Eusebius-of-Caesarea), a friend and panegyrist of Constantine and a church historian whose creation of a “political theology” sealed the union between the [Christian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christianity) emperor and the church. [St. Athanasius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Athanasius) wrote apologetic works and a life of [St. Anthony](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Anthony-of-Egypt). Also prominent were the great [Cappadocians](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Cappadocian-Father): St. Basil of Caesarea, St. Gregory of Nazianzus, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and St. John Chrysostom of [Antioch](https://www.britannica.com/place/Antioch-ancient-city-west-central-Turkey), the greatest preacher of his time. The Westerners, too, had great scholars and brilliant writers: [St. Hilary of Poitiers](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Hilary-of-Poitiers), enemy of the Arians and of Constantius; [St. Ambrose](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Ambrose), administrator and pastor, whose excessive authority was imposed on [Gratian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gratian-Roman-emperor) and even on Theodosius; and [St. Jerome](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Jerome), a desert monk and confessor of upper-class Roman ladies, a [formidable](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/formidable) polemicist who knew Greek and Hebrew and made the first faithful translation of the Old and New Testaments (the Vulgate) as well as of a chronicle of world history, which was a translation and continuation of the work of Eusebius. Finally,[St. Augustine](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Augustine), the bishop of Hippo, was a great pastor, a vigorous controversialist, a sensitive and passionate writer (the Confessions), and the powerful theologian of The City of God. The century that developed these great minds cannot be considered [decadent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/decadent).

## The eclipse of the Roman Empire in the West (c. 395–500) and the German migrations

## Invasions in the early 5th century

After the death of Theodosius the Western [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science) was governed by young [Honorius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Honorius-Roman-emperor). [Stilicho](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Flavius-Stilicho), an experienced statesman and general, was charged with assisting him and maintaining unity with the East, which had been entrusted to [Arcadius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Arcadius). The Eastern leaders soon rejected Stilicho’s tutelage. An antibarbarian reaction had developed in Constantinople, which impeded the objectives of the half-Vandal Stilicho. He wanted to intervene on several occasions in the internal affairs at Constantinople but was prevented from doing so by a threat from the [Visigoth](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Visigoth) chieftain [Alaric](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alaric), whom he checked at Pollentia in 402, then by the Ostrogoth [Radagaisus’](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Radagaisius) raid in 406, and finally by the great invasion of the Gauls in 407. The following year he hoped to restore unity by installing a new emperor in Constantinople, [Theodosius II](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Theodosius-II), the son of Arcadius, who had died prematurely; but he [succumbed](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/succumbed) to a political and military plot in [August](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/August) 408. The division of the two partes imperii was now a permanent one.

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/44/1044-050-A36E58D3/invasions.jpg)

[**Barbarian invasions**](https://cdn.britannica.com/44/1044-050-A36E58D3/invasions.jpg)Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

Honorius, seated in [Ravenna](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ravenna-Italy), a city easier to defend than Milan, had only incompetent courtiers surrounding him, themselves animated by a violent hatred of the barbarians. Alaric soon reappeared, at the head of his Visigoths, demanding land and money. Tired of the Romans’ double-dealing, he descended on [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/event/Sack-of-Rome-410) itself. The city was taken and pillaged for three days, thus putting an end to an era of Western history (August 410). An Arian, Alaric spared the churches. He died shortly thereafter in the south; his successor, [Athaulf](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ataulphus), left the peninsula to march against the Gauls.

Fleeing from the terrifying advance of the [Huns](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hun-people), on December 31, 406, the Vandals, [Suebi](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Suebi), and [Alani](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Alani), immediately followed by the Burgundians and bands of Alemanni, crossed the frozen Rhine and swept through Gaul, effortlessly throwing back the federated Franks and Alemanni from the frontiers. Between 409 and 415 a great many of these barbarians arrived in Spain and settled in Lusitania (Suebi) and in Baetica (Vandals, whence the name Andalusia). As soon as Gaul had become slightly more peaceful, Athaulf’s Visigoths arrived, establishing themselves in [Narbonensis](https://www.britannica.com/place/Narbonensis) and Aquitania. After recognizing them as “federates,” Honorius asked them to go to Spain to fight the Vandals. Meanwhile, the Roman general Constantius eliminated several usurpers in Gaul, confined the Goths in Aquitania, and reorganized the administration (the Gallic assembly of 418). But he was unable to expel the Franks, the Alemanni, and the Burgundians, who had occupied the northern part of the country, nor to eliminate the brigandage of the Bagaudae. He was associated with the empire and was proclaimed [Augustus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-Roman-emperor) in 421, but he died shortly afterward. His son, [Valentinian III](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Valentinian-III), succeeded Honorius in 423 and reigned until 455.

## The beginning of Germanic hegemony in the West

During the first half of the 5th century the barbarians gradually installed themselves, in spite of the efforts of the Roman general [Aetius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Flavius-Aetius) at the head of a small army of mercenaries and of Huns. Aetius took back Arles and Narbonne from the Visigoths in 436, either pushed back the Salian and Ripuarian Franks beyond the Rhine or incorporated them as federates, settled the defeated Burgundians in Sapaudia (Savoy), and established the Alani in Orléans. The other provinces were lost: Britain, having been abandoned in 407 and already invaded by the [Picts](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pict) and [Scots](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Scot), fell to the [Angles](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Angle-people), [Saxons](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Saxon-people), and [Jutes;](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jute-people) a great Suebi kingdom, officially federated but in fact independent, was organized in Spain after the departure of the Vandals, and it allied itself to the Visigoths of [Theodoric I](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Theodoric-I-king-of-Reims), who were settled in the country around the Garonne.

In 428 the [Vandal](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vandal-Germanic-people) [Gaiseric](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaiseric) led his people (80,000 persons, including 15,000 warriors) to Africa. St. Augustine died in 430 in besieged Hippo, [Carthage](https://www.britannica.com/place/Carthage-ancient-city-Tunisia) fell in 435, and in 442 a treaty gave Gaiseric the rich provinces of Byzacena and [Numidia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Numidia). From there he was able to starve Rome, threaten [Sicily](https://www.britannica.com/place/Sicily), and close off the western basin of the Mediterranean to the [Byzantines](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Byzantines).

Shortly afterward, in 450, [Attila’s](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Attila-king-of-the-Huns) Huns invaded the West—first Gaul, where, after having been kept out of Paris, they were defeated by Aetius on the Campus Mauriacus (near Troyes), then Italy, which they evacuated soon after having received tribute from the pope, St. [Leo](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Leo-I). Attila died shortly afterward; and this invasion, which indeed left more legendary memories than actual ruins, had shown that a solidarity had been created between the Gallo-Romans and their [barbarian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/barbarian) occupiers, for the Franks, the Alemanni, and even Theodoric’s Visigoths had come to Aetius’ aid.

After the death of Aetius, in 454, and of Valentinian III, in 455, the West became the stake in the intrigues of the German chiefs Ricimer, [Orestes](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Orestes-Roman-general), and Odoacer, who maintained real power through puppet emperors. In 457–461 the energetic [Majorian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Majorian) reestablished imperial authority in southern Gaul until he was defeated by Gaiseric and assassinated shortly afterward. Finally, in 476, [Odoacer](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Odoacer) deposed the last emperor, [Romulus Augustulus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Romulus-Augustulus), had himself proclaimed king in the barbaric fashion, and governed Italy with moderation, being de jure under the emperor of the East. The end of the Roman Empire of the West passed almost unperceived.

# Barbarian kingdoms

Several [barbarian](https://www.britannica.com/topic/barbarian) kingdoms were then set up: in Africa, Gaiseric’s kingdom of the Vandals; in Spain and in [Gaul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Gaul-ancient-region-Europe) as far as the Loire, the Visigothic kingdom; and farther to the north, the kingdoms of the Salian Franks and the Alemanni. The barbarians were everywhere a small minority. They established themselves on the great estates and divided the land to the benefit of the federates without doing much harm to the lower classes or disturbing the economy. The old inhabitants lived under [Roman law](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-law), while the barbarians kept their own “personality of laws,” of which the best-known is the judicial [composition](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/composition), the [Wergild](https://www.britannica.com/topic/wergild). Romans and barbarians coexisted but uneasily. Among the obstacles to reconciliation were differences in mores; social and political institutions (personal monarchies, [fidelity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fidelity) of man to man); [language](https://www.britannica.com/topic/language), although Latin was still used in administration; and above all religion: the Arianism of the barbarians permitted the Roman Catholic bishops to retain their hold over their flocks. The only persecution, however, was under the Vandals, whose domination was the harshest.

Two great kingdoms marked the end of the 5th century. In Gaul, [Clovis](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Clovis-I), the king of the Salian [Franks](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Frank-people) (reigned 481/482–511), expelled [Syagrius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Syagrius), the last Roman, from Soissons, took Alsace and the Palatinate from the Alemanni (496), and killed [Alaric II](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alaric-II), king of the Visigoths, at Vouillé (507). His conversion to Catholicism assured him the support of the bishops, and Frankish domination was established in Gaul. At the same time, [Theodoric](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Theodoric-king-of-Italy), king of the Ostrogoths, reigned in [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy). He had been charged by the emperor [Zeno](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Zeno-emperor) to take back Italy from [Odoacer](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Odoacer) in 488, and in 494 he had himself proclaimed king at [Ravenna](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ravenna-Italy). His Goths, few in number, were established in the north; elsewhere he preserved the old imperial administration, with senators as prefects. Externally, he kept Clovis from reaching the Mediterranean and extended his state up to the valley of the Rhône. Theodoric died in 526. Ten years later [Justinian](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Justinian-I) charged his general [Belisarius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Belisarius) with the reconquest of Italy, a costly, devastating, and temporary operation that lasted from 535 to 540.

## Analysis of the decline and fall

[[](https://www.britannica.com/video/179480/poisoning-malaria-experts-decline-Roman-Empire)](https://www.britannica.com/video/179480/poisoning-malaria-experts-decline-Roman-Empire)

**Track down the theories of either lead poisoning or malaria for the decline of the Roman Empire**

Learn why some experts believe that lead poisoning (from water pipelines) or malaria contributed to the decline of the Roman Empire.

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The causes of the fall of the [empire](https://www.britannica.com/topic/empire-political-science) have been sought in a great many directions and with a great deal of interest, even urgency, among historians of the West; for it has been natural for them to see or seek parallels between [Rome’s](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome) fate and that of their own times. In any choice of explanations there is likely to be a hidden sense of priorities determining the definition of “civilization,” or specifically the civilization of “Rome” or of “the classical world.” If, for example, classical civilization is identified with the literature of the ancients at what one conceives to be its best, then “the end” of this civilization has to be set at some point of decline and explanations for its coming to be sought in the preexisting conditions; or if not on literature but on political domination, then some other point in time must be chosen and explained in terms of what seems to have led up to it. There have been endless variations on this search, and there will continue to be more, no doubt, since it is agreed that literature did, in fact, diminish in quality, as did jurisprudence, although at a different date, and oratory, and vigorous political debate in the capital, and powerfully innovative philosophy, and sculpture, and civic patriotism, and the willingness to die for one’s country. “Civilization” turns out to be not one single entity but a web of many strands, each of its own length.

Perhaps the view attracting the most adherents, however, has focused on the ability of the empire to maintain its political and military integrity—that being the strand apparently most central and significant—and the juncture at which that ability is most dramatically challenged and found wanting—the period of “the barbarian invasions,” meaning 407 and roughly the ensuing decade. If this juncture in turn is examined and the [antecedents](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/antecedents) of the empire’s weakness sought in internal developments, they can only be found in the government. Belief in and obedience to the monarch was not lacking, nor [military technology](https://www.britannica.com/technology/military-technology) at least matching that of the invaders, nor a population large enough to field a large force, nor the force itself (on paper, at least), nor the economic potential adequate to the arming of it. Particular defeats described by contemporaries in reasonable detail are almost uniformly attributable to the rottenness of government as described above, rendering soldiers undisciplined, untrained, frequently on indefinite leave, and without good morale or proper equipment. Soldiers were unpaid because of various abuses in the collection and delivery of supplies and money from taxpayers, and they were distracted from their proper duties by their own and their officers’ extortionate habits in contact with their civilian hosts. For the same basic reason—that is, abuse of power wielded through service in the army or bureaucracy—the administration of the cities no longer enjoyed the efforts of the urban elites, who by 407 had long since fled from active service to some exempt government post or title. For the same reason, finally, corrective measures needed against these systemic weaknesses could not be developed by [enlightened](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enlightened) men at the centre because they were screened from the truth of things, were at the mercy of incompetent or venal agents, or were unable to maintain themselves in power against the plotters around them. The details of all these charges that can be made against late Roman government are writ large in the great collection of imperial edicts published in 438, the Theodosian Code, as well as in the works of roughly contemporary writers from East and West, such as Synesius, Augustine, Libanius, Themistius, Chrysostom, Symmachus, Bishop Maximus of Turin, and, above all, [Ammianus Marcellinus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ammianus-Marcellinus). An empire that could not deliver to a point of need all the defensive force it still possessed could not well stand against the enemy outside.

# Lucius Mummius

Roman statesman

**Lucius Mummius**, (flourished 2nd century BC), Roman statesman and [general](https://www.britannica.com/topic/general) who crushed the uprising of the [Achaean Confederacy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Achaean-League) against Roman rule in Greece and destroyed the ancient city of [Corinth](https://www.britannica.com/place/Corinth-Greece).

As [praetor](https://www.britannica.com/topic/praetor) and proconsul in 153–152, Mummius defeated the rebellious Lusitanians in southwestern Spain. In 152 he celebrated a triumph at [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome). As [consul](https://www.britannica.com/topic/consul-ancient-Roman-official) in 146, he was appointed commander of the [war](https://www.britannica.com/topic/war) against the Achaean Confederacy. He defeated the Greek forces at Leucopetra on the [Isthmus of Corinth](https://www.britannica.com/place/Isthmus-of-Corinth) and captured and destroyed Corinth. The Roman Senate then dissolved the Achaean Confederacy, and Mummius organized the province of Macedonia, which was to be supervised by Roman military commanders. Mummius’s indifference to works of art and ignorance of their value is shown by his well-known remark to those who contracted for the shipment of the treasures of Corinth to Rome, that “if they lost or damaged them, they would have to replace them with ware of equal value.” Mummius celebrated a second triumph. In 142 he was [censor](https://www.britannica.com/topic/censor-ancient-Roman-official) with [Publius Cornelius Scipio](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Publius-Cornelius-Scipio) Aemilianus; he helped [alleviate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alleviate) Scipio’s severity.

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[…and statue to Hercules by](https://www.britannica.com/topic/epigraphy/Classical-Greece" \l "ref523627)**[Lucius Mummius](https://www.britannica.com/topic/epigraphy/Classical-Greece" \l "ref523627)**[in 146 bce in fulfillment of a vow he had made during his conquest of Greece and sack of Corinth. “Unofficial” cults, especially those of Mithra and Jupiter Dolichenus, can be traced and mapped throughout the empire chiefly with the help of dedicatory…](https://www.britannica.com/topic/epigraphy/Classical-Greece" \l "ref523627)

**[Achaean League](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Achaean-League)**

[Achaean League, 3rd-century-bc confederation of the towns of Achaea in ancient Greece. The 12 Achaean cities of the northern Peloponnese had organized a league by the 4th century bc to protect themselves against piratical raids from across the Corinthian Gulf, but this league fell apart after the death of Alexander…](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Achaean-League)

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# Antioch

modern and ancient city, south-central Turkey

**Antioch**, Turkish **Antakya**, populous city of ancient [Syria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Syria) and now a major town of south-central [Turkey](https://www.britannica.com/place/Turkey). It lies near the mouth of the [Orontes River](https://www.britannica.com/place/Orontes-River), about 12 miles (19 km) northwest of the Syrian border.

**Crusades: From Constantinople to Antioch**

Late in May 1097 the Crusaders and a contingent of Byzantine soldiers reached the capital of the Turkish sultanate, Nicaea (now İznik, Turkey),...

[Antioch](https://www.britannica.com/place/Antioch-medieval-principality-Turkey) was founded in 300 BCE by [Seleucus I Nicator](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Seleucus-I-Nicator), a former general of [Alexander the Great](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alexander-the-Great). The new city soon became the western terminus of the caravan routes over which goods were brought from Persia and elsewhere in [Asia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Asia) to the Mediterranean. Antioch’s strategic command of north-south and east-west roads across northwestern Syria greatly contributed to its growth and prosperity in [Hellenistic](https://www.britannica.com/event/Hellenistic-Age), [Roman](https://www.britannica.com/place/Roman-Empire), and [Byzantine](https://www.britannica.com/place/Byzantine-Empire) times. The suburb of Daphne, five miles to the south, was a favourite pleasure resort and residential area for Antioch’s upper classes; and the seaport [Seleucia Pieria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Seleucia-Pieria), at the mouth of the Orontes River, was the city’s harbour.

Antioch was the centre of the [Seleucid kingdom](https://www.britannica.com/place/Seleucid-Empire) until 64 BCE, when it was annexed by Rome and was made the capital of the Roman province of Syria. It became the third largest city of the Roman Empire in size and importance (after [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome) and [Alexandria](https://www.britannica.com/place/Alexandria-Egypt)) and possessed magnificent temples, theatres, aqueducts, and baths. The city was the headquarters of the Roman garrison in Syria, one of whose principal duties was the defense of the empire’s eastern border from Persian attacks. Antioch was also one of the earliest centres of [Christianity](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christianity); it was there that the followers of Christ were first called Christians, and the city was the headquarters of the missionary St. [Paul](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Paul-the-Apostle) about 47–55 CE.

In the 4th century CE Antioch became the seat of a new Roman office that administered all the provinces on the empire’s eastern flank. Because the [church](https://www.britannica.com/topic/church-Christianity) of Antioch had the distinction of having been founded by the apostles [Peter](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Peter-the-Apostle) and Paul, its bishop ranked with the bishops of the other apostolic foundations—[Jerusalem](https://www.britannica.com/place/Jerusalem), Rome, and Alexandria (Constantinople [now [Istanbul](https://www.britannica.com/place/Istanbul)] was accepted in this category later). The bishops of Antioch thus became influential in theology and ecclesiastic politics.

Antioch prospered in the 4th and 5th centuries from nearby olive plantations, but the 6th century brought a series of disasters from which the city never fully recovered. A fire in 525 was followed by earthquakes in 526 and 528, and the city was captured temporarily by the Persians in 540 and 611. Antioch was absorbed into the [Arab](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Arab) caliphate in 637. Under the Arabs it shrank to the status of a small town. The [Byzantines](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Byzantines) recaptured the city in 969, and it served as a frontier fortification until taken by the [Seljuq](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Seljuq) Turks in 1084. In 1098 it was captured by the Crusaders, who made it the capital of one of their principalities, and in 1268 the city was taken by the [Mamlūks](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mamluk), who razed it to the ground. Antioch never recovered from this last disaster, and it had declined to a small village when taken by the Ottoman Turks in 1517. It remained part of the [Ottoman Empire](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ottoman-Empire) until after [World War I](https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-I), when it was transferred to Syria under French [mandate](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mandate). France allowed the town and surrounding area to rejoin Turkey in 1939.

Remarkably few remains of the ancient city are now visible, since most of them lie buried beneath thick alluvial deposits from the Orontes River. Nevertheless, important archaeological discoveries have been made in the locality. Excavations conducted in 1932–39 in Daphne and Antioch uncovered a large number of fine [mosaic](https://www.britannica.com/art/mosaic-art) floors from both private houses and public buildings. Dating largely from the Roman imperial period, many of the floors represent copies of famous ancient paintings that otherwise would have been unknown. The mosaics are now exhibited in the local Archaeological Museum.

The activities of the modern town are based mainly on the agricultural produce of the [adjacent](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adjacent) area, including the intensively [cultivated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultivated) Amik plain. The chief crops are wheat, cotton, grapes, rice, olives, vegetables, and fruit. The town has soap and olive-oil factories and cotton ginning and other processing industries. Silk, shoes, and knives are also manufactured. Pop. (2000) 144,910; (2013 est.) 216,960.

**[Crusades: From Constantinople to Antioch](https://www.britannica.com/event/Crusades/From-Constantinople-to-Antioch" \l "ref392360)**

[Late in May 1097 the Crusaders and a contingent of Byzantine soldiers reached the capital of the Turkish sultanate, Nicaea (now İznik, Turkey), which surrendered to the Byzantines on June 19. The Crusade army left Nicaea for](https://www.britannica.com/event/Crusades/From-Constantinople-to-Antioch" \l "ref392360)**[Antioch](https://www.britannica.com/event/Crusades/From-Constantinople-to-Antioch" \l "ref392360)**[on June 26 and found crossing…](https://www.britannica.com/event/Crusades/From-Constantinople-to-Antioch" \l "ref392360)

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**[ancient Rome: Septimius Severus](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Rome/The-Later-Roman-Empire" \l "ref298767)**

[…at the end of 194;](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Rome/The-Later-Roman-Empire" \l "ref298767)**[Antioch](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Rome/The-Later-Roman-Empire" \l "ref298767)**[and Byzantium were pillaged after a long siege. Septimius even invaded Mesopotamia, for the Parthians had supported Niger. But this campaign was quickly interrupted: in the West, Albinus, disappointed at not being associated with the empire, proclaimed himself Augustus in 196 and invaded Gaul.…](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Rome/The-Later-Roman-Empire" \l "ref298767)

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# Otho: Roman emperor: **Alternative Title:** Marcus Salvius Otho

**Otho**, in full**Marcus Otho Caesar Augustus**, original name **Marcus Salvius Otho**, (born AD 32—died April 16, 69, near [Cremona](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cremona-Italy), Venetia [Italy]), Roman [emperor](https://www.britannica.com/topic/emperor-title) from January to April 69.

Otho was born into a family that had held the consulship under [Augustus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-Roman-emperor). He married Poppaea Sabina, but when the emperor [Nero](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nero-Roman-emperor) took Poppaea for his mistress—she later became his wife—Otho was sent from [Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/Rome) to govern Lusitania (58). For 10 years he ruled this province with [integrity](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/integrity). Then, in 68, Otho joined the rebellion against Nero led by [Galba](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Galba), governor of the neighbouring province of Tarraconensis. He had hoped to be designated Galba’s successor, but when Galba disappointed him by adopting Lucius Piso Licinianus (January 69), Otho prepared to seize power. Otho organized a [conspiracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conspiracy) among the [Praetorian Guard](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Praetorian-Guard), who murdered Galba in the [Roman Forum](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Forum). Otho was acclaimed emperor (January 15).

Before Galba’s death, however, the legions in [Germany](https://www.britannica.com/place/Germany) had declared for [Aulus Vitellius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aulus-Vitellius), whose troops were already moving toward [Italy](https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy). Acting with speed and determination, Otho sent a naval expedition to Narbonensis (a region in southern Gaul), summoned the Danube legions, and himself marched out on March 14. Although substantial forces joined Otho from Illyricum, by early April the Vitellian forces were far stronger. Experienced advisers [counseled](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/counseled) delay, but Otho insisted on action. His army was defeated at Bedriacum, about 22 miles (35 km) east of Cremona, and Otho committed [suicide](https://www.britannica.com/topic/suicide).

[[](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Rome/Augustan-art-and-literature#ref298662)](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Rome/Augustan-art-and-literature" \l "ref298662)

**[ancient Rome: The year of the four emperors](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Rome/Augustan-art-and-literature" \l "ref298662)**

[…at Rome the praetorians preferred Marcus Salvius](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Rome/Augustan-art-and-literature" \l "ref298662)**[Otho](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Rome/Augustan-art-and-literature" \l "ref298662)**[, whom Galba had alienated by choosing a descendant of the old republican aristocracy for his successor.](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Rome/Augustan-art-and-literature" \l "ref298662)**[Otho](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Rome/Augustan-art-and-literature" \l "ref298662)**[promptly procured Galba’s murder and obtained senatorial recognition; this ended the monopoly of the purple for the republican nobility.…](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Rome/Augustan-art-and-literature" \l "ref298662)

[[](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vespasian#ref35015)](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vespasian" \l "ref35015)

**[Vespasian: Struggle for power](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vespasian" \l "ref35015)**

[…inevitable; but the main contenders,](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vespasian" \l "ref35015)**[Otho](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vespasian" \l "ref35015)**[and Vitellius, were both men whom Vespasian could reasonably hope to challenge. The chronology of Vespasian’s actions cannot be precisely determined; what is certain is that at the latest after](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vespasian" \l "ref35015)**[Otho](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vespasian" \l "ref35015)**[’s defeat and suicide on April 16, he began to collect support. On July…](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vespasian" \l "ref35015)

**[Aulus Caecina Alienus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aulus-Caecina-Alienus" \l "ref175735)**

[…69 Galba was killed, and Marcus Salvius](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aulus-Caecina-Alienus" \l "ref175735)**[Otho](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aulus-Caecina-Alienus" \l "ref175735)**[was made emperor.](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aulus-Caecina-Alienus" \l "ref175735)**[Otho](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aulus-Caecina-Alienus" \l "ref175735)**[’s forces were crushed by Caecina and Fabius Valens at Bedriacum (near Cremona) in April, and](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aulus-Caecina-Alienus" \l "ref175735)**[Otho](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aulus-Caecina-Alienus" \l "ref175735)**[committed suicide.…](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aulus-Caecina-Alienus" \l "ref175735)

**Cyrene**, ancient Greek colony in [Libya](https://www.britannica.com/place/Libya), founded c. 631 BC by a group of emigrants from the island of [Thera](https://www.britannica.com/place/Thera) in the Aegean. Their leader, [Battus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Battus-I), became the first king, founding the [dynasty](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dynasty) of the [Battiads](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Battiads), whose members, named alternately Battus and Arcesilaus, ruled Cyrene for eight generations (until c. 440 BC). Under their rule, the city prospered economically and expanded, establishing its port of Apollonia (Marsa Sūsah) and the towns of Barce (al-Marj) and [Euhesperides](https://www.britannica.com/place/Benghazi), or Berenice (Banghāzī).

[](https://cdn.britannica.com/86/12486-004-410ECD43/Sanctuary-Apollo-Cyrene.jpg)

Sanctuary of Apollo, Cyrene

Josephine Powell, Rome

After a further influx of Greek colonists c. 570 BC, Greek–Libyan relations broke down; the new constitution granted under Battus III failed to allay dissension among the rival domestic factions, and c. 525 Cyrene was subjected to a short-lived Persian invasion.

The [republic](https://www.britannica.com/topic/republic-government) that followed was politically undistinguished. Then, under the aegis of Ptolemaic Egypt (from 323 BC), Cyrene became one of the great [intellectual](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intellectual) centres of the classical world, boasting a medical school and such scholars as the geographer [Eratosthenes](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Eratosthenes) and the philosopher [Aristippus](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aristippus), founder of the Cyrenaics. In 96 BC [Cyrenaica](https://www.britannica.com/place/Cyrenaica) came under Roman rule and in 67 BC was united with Crete to form a senatorial [province](https://www.britannica.com/topic/province-ancient-Roman-government), with Cyrene as local capital. The two centuries of relative prosperity under the Romans—broken by a revolt of the Cyrenian Jews (AD 115)—were followed by steady decline. With the Arab conquest (AD 642), the city ceased to exist.

The site of ancient Cyrene is partly occupied by the modern village of Shaḥḥāt in [al-Jabal al-Akhḍar](https://www.britannica.com/place/Akhdar-Mountains), eight miles southwest of Marsa Sūsah. Three main areas of the city have been excavated: the fountain and sanctuary of Apollo, where the Venus of Cyrene and a colossal statue of [Apollo](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Apollo-Greek-mythology) were found; the upper city, site of a forum and basilica modelled on the Kaisareion of Alexandria, and a large 2nd-century house with fine mosaics; and the centre of the Roman town, in which stands a huge Doric column marking the site of the temple of [Zeus](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Zeus), a gigantic Doric building of the late 6th century BC.

[[](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa/The-Greeks-in-Cyrenaica#ref487445)](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa/The-Greeks-in-Cyrenaica" \l "ref487445)

**[North Africa: The Greeks in Cyrenaica](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa/The-Greeks-in-Cyrenaica" \l "ref487445)**

[…Thera (Thíra Santorini) led to](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa/The-Greeks-in-Cyrenaica" \l "ref487445)**[Cyrene](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa/The-Greeks-in-Cyrenaica" \l "ref487445)**[being founded (c. 630) on a site within easy reach of the sea, well watered, and in the fertile foothills of the Akhḍar Mountains. The founder’s name was, or was changed to, Battus, a Libyan word meaning king. For some time friendly relations existed…](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa/The-Greeks-in-Cyrenaica" \l "ref487445)

[[](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa/The-Vandal-conquest#ref487533)](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa/The-Vandal-conquest" \l "ref487533)

**[North Africa: Roman Cyrenaica](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa/The-Vandal-conquest" \l "ref487533)**

[…began a formidable rebellion in](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa/The-Vandal-conquest" \l "ref487533)**[Cyrene](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa/The-Vandal-conquest" \l "ref487533)**[that spread to Egypt. No reason for it is known. It caused great destruction and loss of life, and Hadrian took special measures to reconstruct](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa/The-Vandal-conquest" \l "ref487533)**[Cyrene](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa/The-Vandal-conquest" \l "ref487533)**[and also sent out some colonists. Peaceful conditions returned, but in 268–269 the Marmaridae, inhabiting the coast between…](https://www.britannica.com/place/North-Africa/The-Vandal-conquest" \l "ref487533)

**Deiotarus**, (died 40 BC), [tetrarch](https://www.britannica.com/topic/tetrarch-ancient-Greek-official) of the Tolistobogii (of western [Galatia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Galatia), now in western Turkey), later [king](https://www.britannica.com/topic/king-monarch) of all Galatia, who, as a faithful ally of the Romans, became involved in the struggles between the Roman generals that led to the fall of the republic.

At the beginning of the Third [Mithradatic War](https://www.britannica.com/event/Mithradatic-wars) (74), Deiotarus drove the invading troops of Mithradates VI of Pontus from [Phrygia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Phrygia). For this support, [Pompey](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pompey-the-Great) (Gnaeus Pompeius) rewarded him in 64 with the title of king and with part of eastern Pontus. In addition, the Senate granted him [Lesser Armenia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Little-Armenia) and most of Galatia.

Siding with Pompey and the Optimates against [Julius Caesar](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julius-Caesar-Roman-ruler) in the Civil War (49–45), Deiotarus escaped with his ally to Asia after the defeat at Pharsalus in 48. The next year the king was pardoned by Caesar. As a consequence of the complaints of certain Galatian princes, however, Deiotarus was deprived of part of his dominions.

In 45, Deiotarus was accused at Rome of having attempted to murder Caesar when the dictator was his guest in Galatia. Cicero undertook Deiotarus’ defense, but the assassination of Caesar in 44 prevented a verdict. Then [Mark Antony](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mark-Antony-Roman-triumvir), bribed with a large sum of money, announced that Caesar had left instructions that specified Deiotarus was to resume rule of his former possessions. Nevertheless, Deiotarus continued to support the anti-Caesarian party until its defeat at Philippi (42), when he went over to the triumvirs. He remained in possession of his kingdom until his death.

**[Galatia](https://www.britannica.com/place/Galatia)**[: Galatia, ancient district in central Anatolia that was occupied early in the 3rd century bc by Celtic tribes, whose bands of marauders created havoc among neighbouring Hellenistic states. Invited from Europe to participate in a Bithynian civil war (278 bc), the Gallic horde plagued western Anatolia until checked by the…](https://www.britannica.com/place/Galatia)

[[](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pompey-the-Great)](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pompey-the-Great)

**[Pompey the Great](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pompey-the-Great)**[: Pompey the Great, one of the great statesmen and generals of the late Roman Republic, a triumvir (61–54 bce) who was an associate and later an opponent of Julius Caesar. He was…](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pompey-the-Great)

**[King](https://www.britannica.com/topic/king-monarch)**[: King, a supreme ruler, sovereign over a nation or a territory, of higher rank than any other secular ruler except an emperor, to whom a king may be subject. Kingship, a worldwide phenomenon, can be elective, as in medieval Germany, but is usually hereditary; it may be absolute or constitutional and…](https://www.britannica.com/topic/king-monarch)

**Marcus Curtius**, a legendary hero of [ancient Rome](https://www.britannica.com/place/ancient-Rome). According to [legend](https://www.britannica.com/art/legend-literature), in 362 BC a deep chasm opened in the [Roman Forum](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Forum). The seers declared that the pit would never close until Rome’s most valuable possession was thrown into it. Claiming that nothing was more [precious](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/precious) than a brave citizen, Curtius leaped, fully armed and on horseback, into the chasm, which immediately closed. The spot was afterward covered by a pond, known as the Lacus Curtius, which was dry by the 1st century BC. The [legend](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/legend) of Marcus Curtius is the most widespread of several tales invented to explain the origin of the name Lacus Curtius.