

Rome  
World History  
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Around 509 B.C.E. the city of Rome, in what is now Italy, established a republic, a government in which citizens elected representatives to rule on their behalf. The highest positions in the government were held by two consuls, or leaders, who ruled the Roman Republic. A senate composed of upper class Romans, called patricians elected these consuls. At this time, lower-class citizens, or plebeians, had virtually no say in the government. The history of the Roman Senate goes as far back as the history of Rome itself. It was first created as a 100-member advisory group for the Roman kings. Later kings expanded the group to 300 members. When the kings were expelled from Rome and the Republic was formed, the Senate became the most powerful governing body. Instead of advising the head of state, it elected the chief executives, called consuls. Senators were, for centuries, strictly from the patrician class. The Senate convened and passed laws in the curia, a large building on the grounds of the Roman Forum.

One of the innovations of the Roman Republic was the notion of equality under the law. In 449 B.C.E., government leaders carved some of Rome's most important laws into 12 great tablets. The Twelve Tables, as they came to be known, were the first Roman laws put in writing. Although the laws were rather harsh by today's standards, they did guarantee every citizen equal treatment under the law. With respect to the law and citizenship, the Romans took a unique approach to the lands that they conquered. Rather than rule those people as conquered subjects, the Romans invited them to become citizens. These people then became a part of Rome, rather than enemies fighting against it. Naturally, these new citizens received the same legal rights as everyone else.

Rome began to expand greatly around 200 BCE, during a series of wars with the powerful Carthaginian Empire. Carthage controlled the Southern Mediterranean while Rome controlled the Northern area. Rome won the Punic Wars and took over control of most of the Mediterranean trade routes.

Beginning in 107 B.C.E., a series of revolts and civil wars destabilized Rome. The expansion of Rome's territories put strain on average Romans due to high taxes. At the same time, Rome's elites benefitted from the expansion. Rome's elites were rewarded through land grants called latifundia. When Rome took over a territory, a portion of the land was given to wealthy and elite Romans. This strategy, referred to as rewarding the elites, was done to keep the wealthy and elite classes loyal to the government, ensuring that they would continue paying taxes and not rebel. The land grants (latifundia) were usually used for farming, in order to make the landowner even more wealthy. These new wealthy landowners often put small Roman farmers out of business, leading to a large gap between Rome's wealthiest classes and their poorest. In addition, large numbers of slaves were taken from newly acquired territories, and given to wealthy Romans. These slave classes were unhappy, leading to several large slave revolts. The revolts around 107 BCE led to the rise of a military government led by Julius Caesar, Gnaeus Pompey, and Marcus Crassus. Since they led as equal rulers, this government was called a triumvirate, or a government with three leaders of equal power. Eventually Julius Caesar seized power for himself. In 45 B.C.E., Caesar was appointed dictator for ten years. In the following year he accepted the appointment of dictator for life. This produced a multiple political dilemma

for the Republic. First, all political power was now concentrated in the hands of Caesar for the indefinite future, which upset the Senate. Several prominent Roman senators such as Marcus Cicero began to oppose Caesar's growing power and asked for a return of the Republic. As Julius Caesar began to centralize the government and take greater command of authority and institute reforms, his position with the Senate grew ominous. A plan was soon hatched within the Senate to assassinate Caesar for his dishonor toward the Senate and in order to save the Republic. When Julius Caesar was called to the Forum in 44 B.C.E. to sign a petition to restore Senate power, the conspirators fell upon him and murdered him.

In the wake of Caesar's death, his nephew, Octavian, and friend Marc Antony hunted down the people that conspired against Caesar, even those such as Marcus Cicero. Cicero was retired from the Senate when Caesar was killed, but was assassinated anyway due to his original opposition. After essentially destroying the republic, Octavian moved to return Rome to a state of peaceful stability and traditional legality. Further, he looked to ensure free elections and allow the court system to operate without undue political pressure. In 27 B.C.E. the Senate took the steps of giving Octavian the title of Augustus and appointing him to a permanent consulship. Through the stability of leadership Caesar Augustus would usher in an extended period of peace and prosperity. This period known as the *Pax Romana* would last over two centuries and see the Republic become the greatest empire the world had ever seen.

One reason why the Roman Empire prospered was that it was unified through several ideas that made it strong. Romans valued the character trait of *gravitas* in which a person valued discipline, strength and loyalty. Such character traits ensured that the empire remained stable and loyal to its leaders. At the same time, Romans also valued Greco-Roman logic and reasoning, making its traders, builders, and leaders creative and prosperous. It was during this period that some of the greatest symbols of Rome were built. Rome's great amphitheater, the Colosseum, was built. The Circus Maximus, Rome's chariot racing stadium was completed and many works projects, such as the building of water pipelines called aqueducts, made Rome into a civilized city. Probably the greatest testament to the power of Rome during this period is that the stability of Rome outlasted even a series of leaders that were wretched. The Julian Emperors (14-68 CE), named thus because they were all related to Julius Caesar, were horrible leaders. Despite their failings, Rome continued to prosper until the last of the good emperors, Marcus Aurelius, died in 192 CE. This success was almost certainly due to Rome's adoption of classic empire ruling characteristics. Rome had a central philosophy (*gravitas*) that united its people together. The empire promoted trade in the Mediterranean and along a network of roads, which made its citizens wealthy and increased the number of goods throughout the empire. Rome had a powerful centralized government, that encouraged obedience, yet was usually tolerant with local customs and beliefs. Rome only encouraged people to speak Latin and adopt Roman values rather than force these ideas upon people. That said, most people ended up adopting Roman customs due to their desire to be part of such a successful empire.

So, why did Rome decline? The most straightforward theory for Western Rome's collapse pins the fall on a string of military losses sustained against outside forces. Rome had tangled with Germanic tribes for centuries, but by the 300s "barbarian" groups like the Goths had encroached beyond the Empire's borders. The Romans weathered a Germanic uprising in the late fourth century, but in 410 the Visigoth King Alaric successfully sacked the city of Rome. The Empire

spent the next several decades under constant threat before “the Eternal City” was raided again in 455, this time by the Vandals. Finally, in 476, the Germanic leader Odoacer staged a revolt and deposed the Emperor Romulus Augustulus. From then on, no Roman emperor would ever again rule from a post in Italy, leading many to cite 476 as the year the Western Empire suffered its deathblow.

Even as Rome was under attack from outside forces, it was also crumbling from within thanks to a severe financial crisis. Constant wars and overspending had significantly lightened imperial coffers, and oppressive taxation and inflation had widened the gap between rich and poor. In the hope of avoiding the taxman, many members of the wealthy classes had even fled to the countryside.

The fate of Western Rome was partially sealed in the late third century, when the Emperor Diocletian divided the Empire into two halves—the Western Empire seated in Rome, and the Eastern Empire in Byzantium, later known as Constantinople. This was done because it was believed that Rome had expanded too much and was too large to manage. The division made the empire more easily governable in the short term, but over time the two halves drifted apart. East and West failed to adequately work together to combat outside threats, and the two often squabbled over resources and military aid. As the gulf widened, the largely Greek-speaking Eastern Empire grew in wealth while the Latin-speaking West descended into economic crisis. Most importantly, the strength of the Eastern Empire served to divert Barbarian invasions to the West. Emperors like Constantine ensured that the city of Constantinople was fortified and well guarded, but Italy and the city of Rome—which only had symbolic value for many in the East—were left vulnerable. The Western political structure would finally disintegrate in the fifth century, but the Eastern Empire endured in some form for another thousand years before being overwhelmed by the Ottoman Empire in the 1400s.