ROMAN CIVILIZATION

Lasting the whole span of the Classical Era in World History from 500 BC – 500 AD – Roman Civilization has captured the imaginations of those who have studied it for its majesty, grandeur, and spectacular accomplishments.

Geography had as significant an impact on Roman civilization as it had on other civilizations. The Apennine Mountains bisect Italy running down the center of the peninsula. These mountains are less rugged than Greece’s mountain ranges so they did not divide the country into small, isolated communities. Italy possessed considerably more productive agricultural land than Greece enabling it to support a much larger population. Rome was a natural middle point on the peninsula and was a central location as a trade crossroads. Moreover, the Italian peninsula itself occupied a commanding position in the Mediterranean Sea, so once Rome had conquered its lands around the sea, its location made the task of governing easier.

Earliest Beginnings

Roman history can be divided up into its 500 years as a Republic and its 500 years as an Empire. The achievements of this civilization were forged from the contributions of many peoples – Indo-Europeans, Greeks, Etruscans, Celts, and Arabs.

From 1700-1500 BC there were a series of migrations and invasions by Indo-Europeans. These tribal peoples came to be known as the Latins and Sabines. Latins settled the plain of Latium and eventually founded the city of Rome. The language of Roman civilization was named after them.

From 800-509 BC the Etruscans dominated the Italian peninsula. These highly cultured people are thought to have migrated to Italy from Asia Minor. They produced advanced architecture, metallurgy, and art. By the 800’s BC they had organized the first city states along the west coast of Italy and formed a confederation of these states.

From 700’s BC on Greeks arrived in Italy in large numbers seeking to establish colonies. Initially settling in southern Italy and Sicily, they built many permanent communities where they farmed grapes and olives, and constructed harbors to carry on trade. They influenced Etruscans with their art, architecture, and literature. Many historians associate Greek and Roman
culture together as one culture due to the enormous influence Greek culture had on the Romans.

**Rome as a City State – 753-509 BC**

Founded in 753 BC, Rome flourished with eclectic influences from Etruscan, Latin, and Greek cultures. Initially Romans were pastoral Indo-Europeans who spoke Latin, but when they fell under the influence of Etruscans, Etruscans showed them how to build palaces, temples, markets, shops and streets. It is said that “Etruscans found Rome a pastoral community, but left it a city.” Etruscans also contributed the toga and short cloak, insignia (badges of rank) including the faces (an axe surrounded by a bundle of rods as a symbol of the power to execute the death penalty worn by Roman consuls). The Etruscans borrowed their alphabet and knowledge of military arts from the Greeks.

**Roman Republic – 509-30 BC**

In 509 BC, Romans expelled the Etruscan King, Tarquin, and founded a Republic. During this time Rome grew into a large city-state and increased her power and influence. When invaded by bellicose and expansionist Carthaginians, Romans were forced to mobilize and defend themselves. Romans fought off the Carthaginians in a series of 3 military confrontations called Punic Wars from 264-146 BC. As a result of the traumatic invasions by Carthaginians, Romans vowed this would never happen again and set out to establish buffer zones to protect themselves. It was for this reason that Romans embarked on a course of imperial rule called imperialism. They eventually extended their imperial dominance to include all of the lands around the Mediterranean Sea – North Africa, Greece, Macedonia, Syria and Gaul. Rome thus came to be an Empire.

During the centuries of the Republic, Roman institutions evolved. In law and politics, Romans pragmatically fashioned institutions in response to challenges as they arose. The Executive Branch of the Republic consisted of 2 consuls who ruled jointly. They controlled the army, administered the country, and performed religious ceremonies. These consuls each had veto power over the other and only served for one year. After one year they returned to the Senate where they had served before becoming consuls. The
Legislative Branch consisted of 2 houses, a Senate with 300 senators who came from aristocratic, land-owning families and the Assembly consisting of elected representatives from wards in Rome and tribes and regions outside Rome. The two houses enacted laws and approved policies. The Judicial Branch consisted of a praetor who governed when Consuls were away and courts and judicial officials who enforced laws.

**Roman Family Life**

Roman families, like families in most rural agrarian societies; stood for a responsible attitude toward work, frugality, self-reliance, and steadfastness in the face of adversity. These qualities made up what the Romans called *virtus*, the physical and moral courage a person should have. They particularly valued the virtue of *pietas*, the belief in respect for family authority and allegiance to the gods of Rome.

The father-dominated family reflected the patriarchal nature of the state. The father had absolute power over wife, children, and slaves. This was called *paterfamilias*. Each father was also like a priest of the cult of family ancestor worship. Ancestor worship emphasized the spirit of the family (*gens*) which was an inner spirit passed from one generation to the next.

The primary purpose of marriage was to produce children. Offspring belonged to the father’s family and, in case of divorce, children remained with the father. A father could abandon an infant at birth.

A Roman girl between 14 and 17 would leave her father’s authority and enter the household of her husband. A young man married at around 20. Roman married couples seemed to have a closer relationship than Greek couples in the sense that Romans spent more time together.

Roman women were welcome at social events such as banquets and gladiator shows. They were accorded more social independence than women of other patriarchal cultures.

**Roman Spirituality and Religion**
Early Roman spirituality consisted of nature worship (also called pantheism or animism). This is the worship of spirits which dwelt in forests, mountains, rivers, and springs. Romans prayed to these sacred spirits.

Gradually Romans adopted Greek gods, goddesses, and myths. Zeus became Jupiter, Dionysus became Bacchus, Poseidon became Neptune, Ares became Mars, and Venus became Aphrodite and therefore became polytheistic. By 300 BC a synthesis of Greek and Roman religion had occurred.

The Romans were tolerant of new cults and “mystery” religions. Mystery religions were called mystery because of secret rituals which were reenactments of the suffering, death, and resurrection of certain gods. Two of the most popular cults in Roman times were the Cult of Cybele and the Cult of Mithras. Cybele was a Mother Goddess from the Middle East. To promote fertility, members of this cult held frenzied and sensual rites. Mithras was the Persian (Zoroastrian) god of light and guardian against evil. He became popular with Roman soldiers because he showed his power as a god by killing a bull who represented all of life. Members of this cult were initiated in elaborate ceremonies, shared sacred meals, followed moral codes, and helped Mithras in his struggle against evil. Mithras determined if they would go to heaven or hell after death.

The Romans, like many ancient peoples, believed in following the correct rituals. They thought the gods would favor them if they observed the exact performance of the ritual. Morality was not as important as correct ritual. This means that the appearances of correctness were more important than the actual substance. There was a government office with priests hired just to be sure that rituals were performed correctly. They also had a college of augers whose responsibility it was to interpret the signs (auspices) or warnings the gods gave to men. The Romans attributed supreme importance to this. Auspices were taken by observing the flights of birds, lightning, and other natural phenomena.

**Overseas Conquests**

As Rome began to acquire more lands around the Mediterranean, it became harder and harder to govern these new lands properly in a Republic. The Republic and its Constitution suited the small city-state of Rome well, but
once Rome became an empire it was hard to rule it as a representative Republic. The Empire was polyglot and multi-cultural. Romans were caught in the grip of trends and currents far beyond their understanding at the time. They idealized agrarian life, but couldn’t return to a simple life. They were world rulers. They had to change their thinking, their institutions, and even their social patterns to meet the new era, but they couldn’t. The result was peasant uprisings, political revolts and outright Civil War in Rome which lasted for about 100 years before the Empire was finally accepted.

Roman military leaders of the various conquered lands sometimes became corrupt and venal. Some of them returned to Rome and bought large estates called latifundia and worked them with slaves captured in war. This meant many Roman farmers and veterans became landless and unemployed because these larger tracts of land had been consolidated and their lands were taken away. These farmers and veterans swarmed to Rome, lived in tenements, and were given bread by the government. This bread was made from grain imported from Egypt and Sicily. Whereas Roman elites – that is, land-owning government officials and military generals – had formerly had a strong sense of duty and patriotism and dedication, the more recent generals and leaders loved power, money and riches and became indifferent to discipline and hard work. Amphitheatres, baths, and places of amusement became the center of their lives.

Some of the events of this period were:

The Gracchus brothers (Tiberius and Gaius) tried to get lands back for the farmers and veterans, but they were both eventually ordered killed by Senators who couldn’t change their thinking to keep up with the times.

Cicero as Consul in 63 BC tried to save the Republic. After his rule Marius and Sulla competed for leadership and their struggle produced factions which engaged in a Civil War. Next the first triumvirate was formed consisting of Pompey, Crassus and Julius Caesar. But Caesar killed Pompey in Greece, Crassus died, and Caesar returned to Rome to start to rule. He planned to establish a dynasty, but on March 15th 44 BC, was assassinated by Brutus and Cassius, two Conservatives in the Senate who did not want a king or dictator, they wanted a Republic.
A second Triumvirate was attempted consisting of Octavian, Lepidus, and Mark Antony. They ruled for a decade. Then Mark Antony and Octavian began to fight. Mark Antony committed suicide. Octavian was declared Emperor and was given the title Augustus (meaning the revered). He ruled from 27 BC to 14 AD, 40 years.

**The Roman Empire, 27 BC – 476 AD**

The Roman Empire lasted about 450 years and consisted of several different dynasties. Augustan Rome was considered a Golden Age of World History. Augustus took the title “Princeps” meaning “First Citizen” or first among equals. The stability of his reign brought about high achievements in arts, literature, and philosophy.

After Augustus, the Claudian dynasty was created and in that dynasty 4 descendents of Augustus ruled: Tiberius, Claudius, Caligula, and Nero. Caligula and Nero were two of the worst emperors who ruled the empire. For example, Nero killed his mother and father, his wife, and finally himself. He persecuted Christians, ordering them to be thrown to the lions and he blamed Christians for a fire which broke out and nearly destroyed Rome.

The next dynasty, the Flavian dynasty, was more successful and the so called 5 good emperors ruled from 96-180 AD. For all of this time Pax Romana was in effect, a time of stability, trade, rule of law, and self-governance of cities. Customs and road tolls were eliminated, piracy and theft were punished, and commerce flourished.

**Rise of Christianity**

Jesus Christ was born into a Jewish community in Judea which was part of the Roman Empire. As was the custom for Jewish men, he could not preach until he was 30 years old, but when he turned 30 he began to preach his doctrines of love, brotherhood, and eternal life with a loving and forgiving God. He preached a close personal relationship with god, mystical and sacred rites, community and a God whose son suffered, died, and was resurrected. The followers of Jesus refined and preached these beliefs but because the Romans required people to worship state gods (Jupiter, Mars, Mercury, Aphrodite) many persecutions of Christians took place. Emperors
issued edicts to confiscate Church property, destroy books, and ban Christians from holding office.

Brutal persecutions of Christians eventually aroused pity and Romans began to come to their defense. Emperor Constantine himself became a Christian and issued an Edict of Toleration in 313. Emperor Theodosius embraced Christianity in 390 AD proclaiming it the official religion of the Roman Empire. Afterwards it spread rapidly.

Why did Christianity spread?

Jesus’ personal example  
Jesus’ social reforms  
Jesus’ beliefs  
Jesus’ miracles  
Christianity was a text-based faith with a coherent structure  
Personal example of Christian martyrs.  
Endorsement of Emperors Constantine and Theodosius  
Christians formulated their identity in distrust of Roman materialism and militarism.  
People sought higher ethical standards due to debasement of Roman society.

**Division of Roman Empire into East and West**

In 325 AD Emperor Constantine decided to create two capital cities for the Empire – one in Rome and one in Byzantium which he re-named Constantinople after himself. From that time, the Eastern Empire began to develop differently. Eventually it became the Byzantine Empire. Due to great wealth and a strong military, this Empire survived for about 1,000 years until the Ottoman Turk invasion in 1453. The Greek language and Greek Orthodox sect of Christianity were the basis of this empire.

**Decline of the Western Empire**

For about 200 years, from about 300-500 AD, the Roman Empire was in decline. Many generations of historians have interpreted the reasons for this decline and dramatic fall:
• Barbarian invasions, Germanic tribes crossed the borders because steppe nomads were pressuring them. Attila the Hun sacked Rome itself and Visigoths in 410 and Vandals in 455 also ravaged it. After invading they established fiefdoms which evolved into medieval manors.

• Weaknesses from within included lack of orderly procedures for transfer of power, corrupt and arrogant officials detached from common people, gap between rich and poor, heavy cost of bread and circuses, burdensome taxes, and a general malaise and decadence.

• Imperial overreach

• Lack of productivity – failure to advance technology because slave labor made it easy to get slaves to do the work. Trade deficits were evident meaning imports exceeded exports. Lack of productivity led to economic stagnation, which caused inflation, scarcity of money, decrease in the value of money and lack of money to support army and bureaucracy.