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1. Rome: Republic and Empire

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1. Rome: Republic and Empire

Abstract

It is believed that about the same time certain barbarian people were entering Greece from the north, others came into the Italian peninsula from the same direction. A fusion with earlier inhabitants similar to that which took place in Greece produced the Italian people of recorded history. In terms of mountains, soil, mineral resources, and climate, there were similarities between the two countries, with Italy in general being the more favored. There was a significant difference: the relative lack of navigable rivers and natural harbors offered much less inducement for trade and commerce than was the case in Greece. Throughout Roman history, agriculture remained much more basic to the Italian economy than to the Greek. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Rome, Greece, Golden Age, Tiber River, Roman Republic, citizenship

Disciplines

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This is a part of [Section I: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem: Background of Western Civilization](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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*Transmitter
innovator
(organizers)*

ROME

1. Republic and Empire (45-46)?

It is believed that about the same time certain barbarian people were entering Greece from the north, others came into the Italian peninsula from the same direction. A fusion with earlier inhabitants similar to that which took place in Greece produced the Italian people of recorded history. In terms of mountains, soil, mineral resources, and climate, there were similarities between the two countries, with Italy in general being the more favored. There was a significant difference: the relative lack of navigable rivers and natural harbors offered much less inducement for trade and commerce than was the case in Greece. Throughout Roman history, agriculture remained much more basic to the Italian economy than to the Greek.

At an early date (probably about 1000 B. C.), a settlement was made around an island near the mouth of the Tiber, midway down the peninsula, at a point where north and south trade routes naturally crossed the river. According to tradition, the inhabitants of this settlement threw off the domination of their unpopular foreign kings in the year 509 B. C., and the Roman Republic (meaning here a government without a king) came into existence. With but one exception, this small settlement and the city into which it grew were not to yield to an invading army for just short of one thousand years after this event. We can understand why, in its day and for long after, Rome appeared to many to be the eternal city.

During the period of the Greek Golden Age (c. 500 - c. 300 B. C.), the Romans grappled with two pressing problems. The first concerned the people who shared the Italian peninsula with them. Gradually, without preconceived plan, the Romans expanded. By about 265 B. C., they had brought the area south of the Po Valley under their control. In making peace, they followed a policy of allying themselves rather closely with the subject states, permitting them the enjoyment of many rights of self-government (except in matters of foreign affairs and defense) and slowly extending the privilege of Roman citizenship. In return, they demanded the payment of taxes and a levy of troops for the Roman army. Such a policy, together with the system of roads begun during this period and the Roman colonies that followed in the wake of the armies, went far toward making possible the unification of the peninsula. As a contrast to the methods employed by the previous empires of history, this policy demonstrated a capacity on the part of the Romans for the art of government.

The second pressing problem was related to the first. The early Roman Republic, almost exclusively agricultural, consisted of two groups of citizens; both noted for their conservatism, devotion to civic duty, and for hard work. The wealthy land-

owners (the patricians) controlled the organs of government. Only they were eligible to hold the important offices. The small farmers (the plebeians) became dissatisfied with this arrangement. As the backbone of the republican armies, they were called upon to bear the brunt of the sacrifice involved in extending the sway of Rome over the Italian peninsula. They felt they were not sharing satisfactorily in the material rewards of conquest or in political power. No example will illustrate more clearly the reason for their resentment than the land question. The patricians had seized lands in conquered territories and added to their already sizable holdings at the very time many plebeians were going deeper into debt and were in danger of losing their small farms. Under the existing constitution, redress of this grievance appeared impossible. From our vantage point, it would seem that what happened subsequently was this: during these two centuries (500-300 B. C.) the plebeians, through the pressure which they exerted, exchanged their continued services in the armies for voluntary concessions, one by one, on the part of the patricians.

The machinery of government of the Roman Republic, as it operated from about 300 B. C. until its collapse almost three centuries later, was influenced by this spirit of voluntary concession on the part of the patricians. There were actually three popular assemblies, the Romans in their conservatism creating new institutions when the need arose without always abolishing the old. One assembly had only nominal duties to perform; it formally conferred power on elected officials. The second, which was controlled by the wealthy, was important principally because it elected certain officials and declared war. The third, in which it was possible for the plebeians to gain a majority, could not initiate legislation but only approve or reject proposals presented to it by the magistrates. In order to participate in the business of any of these assemblies, a citizen had to come to Rome, whether he happened to be a farmer living several miles from the city or a trader in southern Italy who had just been granted Roman citizenship.

Executive power was vested in two consuls, who were chosen by the second assembly mentioned above. They served for terms of one year and normally could not be reelected until ten years after their terms had expired. During their tenure of office, the consuls held what the Romans called the imperium, or supreme executive authority. According to the theory, they held it, not because it was their right, but because the people, who were the ultimate source of all political power, had conferred it upon them for a limited time. This idea of the imperium was significant throughout Roman history. It was capable of two quite different interpretations. On the one hand, it could be used to stress that all just power comes from the consent of the governed, the people. On the other hand, it could be, and frequently was, used to justify the absoluteness of executive authority, once the grant of power had been given in an accepted way. The consuls were not the only officials to have the imperium. It was granted also to the praetors (of whom more

later), but the consuls were the chief magistrates of the Roman Republic. They commanded the armies and executed the laws. They were expected to act in concert; one consul had a veto over the acts of the other. One of the concessions gained by the plebeians was the right of their assembly to elect tribunes (there were eventually ten), who could veto most of the acts of the consuls.

In the old Roman family, the father (paterfamilias) possessed a supreme authority which is more than coincidentally similar to the imperium. This authority extended over his wife, children, servants, and slaves; and it included the power of life and death. But before dealing with a grave family crisis, the father was expected to seek the counsel of male relatives. The Roman Senate corresponded to this family advisory group. The name is derived from the Latin word for old or aged. The Senate began, and in theory it remained, an influential council of experienced men who acted solely in an advisory capacity to consuls and assemblies. Its members were selected from among those legally eligible (particularly public officials who had completed their terms of office) by two men chosen regularly to take the census of men and property. Senators held office for life, a fact which helps to explain why they were usually the most powerful conservative force in the government of the Roman Republic.

This brief description indicates that, with so many elements in its society represented in the government and with the many possibilities for balance between them, Rome possessed the ingredients from which a democracy similar to the Athenian easily might have developed. Yet such was not to be the case. The oligarchy remained. The patricians, joined now by some of the wealthier plebeians, continued to dominate the government. They exercised their leadership through the Senate, whose members were not paid, could not engage in commerce or accept public contracts, and who therefore had to be men of means. The lines of control from the Senate were sometimes informal (senators might, for example, marry their daughters to tribunes), but they were nevertheless real. In addition, the Senate -- the only organ of government in which there was long tenure of office -- gained many important powers, including control of the purse and rather complete supervision of foreign affairs. By 200 B. C., it was the most influential branch of government. Nevertheless, it should not be thought that the stage necessarily was being set for another great crisis in Rome because the gains of the plebeians were being dissipated almost from the moment of achievement. That was indeed the fate of some of them, but the Roman system was so established that most of the men with political and military experience were members of the Senate. For many years the performance of this body was both successful and creditable, and it enjoyed corresponding prestige among the politically alert part of the population, whether patrician or plebeian. The sanction which made this arrangement work with a minimum of friction would have been completely alien to an Athenian of Pericles' day, with his insistence on rotation

in office and direct participation in political affairs by the citizen. But this was Rome, and the Roman was always more interested in the legal rights which his citizenship carried with it than he was in the privilege of voting in an assembly or of being elected to office.

By the time the Roman government began functioning as just described, Alexander the Great had conquered most of the civilized world between India and the Adriatic. His death in 323 B. C. had brought about the division of the empire -- the largest ever created up to that time -- among several of his generals. These successor states were able to provide a degree of stable government for some time, but the rise of Rome clearly upset whatever political balance had been attained in the Mediterranean world. The only other power in the western Mediterranean was Carthage, which lived by its vast commercial activities and controlled parts of North Africa, Spain, and western Sicily. It was perhaps to be expected that Rome and Carthage would in time clash. The issue between them, once joined, was not finally decided in Rome's favor until three bitter and costly wars had been fought (264-146 B. C.) and until the city of Carthage had been utterly destroyed. Bit by bit, its empire passed to the victor. Even before these wars ended, some of the weaker states in the eastern Mediterranean appealed to Rome for protection against their more aggressive neighbors. Rome was not always anxious to intervene -- although the prospect of booty was pleasing -- and was not always anxious to stay after intervention; but the reluctance wore off and the end result was the annexation of one province after another: Macedonia, Greece, Syria, and Egypt between 148 and 31 B. C. A series of campaigns in the west brought Gaul (now France) under Roman control -- a significant step, it turned out, in preparing the seedbed for the later Western Civilization. It was the army of the Roman Republic which won most of the territory of the empire and which made Rome master of the Mediterranean world.

As it had earlier, now again the expansion of Rome presented vexing problems. How were these recently acquired areas to be governed? The methods which were proving successful in dealing with the other people living in the Italian peninsula did not seem applicable to Spain or to Syria. Accordingly, the Romans improvised a policy which permitted the carrying off of ample booty (slaves, precious metals, art objects -- anything that appealed to a Roman eye) and which then organized the annexed areas into provinces. Each province was allowed a measure of local autonomy, which depended largely upon its previous polity. More self-government was allowed Athens than Spain. This minimized the burden of law and order that would otherwise have fallen on Rome. Each province was required to pay taxes and more often than not furnish a moderate tribute, perhaps of grain. Roman authority was vested in a governor, appointed by the Senate for a term of one year only and without a salary. Since there was no machinery provided for collecting taxes, this right was auctioned off to the highest bidder. The collector (the publican) was permitted a prescribed profit for his work.

It is not difficult to see that the success of this policy rested heavily upon the honesty of Roman officials. The governor, unpaid and aware that he could hope to spend but two non-consecutive one year terms in his post, was a natural ally of the tax collector who was anxious to exceed his permitted profit and of the contractor who was looking for favors in the awarding of contracts for big government projects. Together they could, and frequently did, fleece the provinces thoroughly. The senators seemed unwilling to halt this as it became more common and scandalous, in part because some senators were former provincial officials while others were awaiting the opportunity to take their turn in a profitable tour of duty. One provincial governor actually suffered at the hands of the Senate for refusing to participate in the fleecing.

Once before in Roman history expansion had brought about internal stresses and strains, which altered materially the constitution of the republic. This time the problems coincident to expansion led to its collapse. The years following 300 B. C. witnessed the precipitous decline of the free farmers who were the backbone of the republican army. Many had been killed during the long campaigns. Others returned after years of absence to find their land run down by neglect, and they went into debt trying to restore it. But there were men who were more fortunate. Senators, generals, retired provincial officials, and businessmen bought up land in Italy, turned it into large estates, and devoted it to specialized production (olives or grapes, for example). They used the most advanced agricultural methods known and employed many of the slaves who were being brought into Italy in increasing numbers. (Julius Caesar enslaved more than 50,000 people during one campaign). If we can believe many of the contemporary writers, these Romans, together with those who profited in other ways from the spoils of empire, underwent a profound moral change at this time. Their sudden wealth was a major factor in contributing to a breakdown in Roman family life, a loss in civic spirit, and a decline of private morality.

The small farmer who lost or sold his land could go into one of the provinces or seek another location in Italy, but many chose instead to live in Rome, whose population by 27 B. C. had reached between 750,000 and 1,000,000. There was very little for them to do in Rome, which was not an industrial center, but there were inducements to keep them there. Many of these onetime farmers were citizens, and as such had the assembly votes which could help to elect officials and enact legislation. To keep them happy, political leaders who were in the market for their support offered bread and circuses: bread in the form of grain sold by the state at very low prices and circuses in the form of frequent public entertainments of various sorts.

These two vexing problems -- the weakness of provincial government and internal social turmoil -- came to the fore in the last century of the republic's existence (133-27 B. C.).

(133-278.4)
During that time several different programs of reform were undertaken, some of which were sensible in their conception but none of which succeeded. The spirit of understanding and of voluntary concession which had characterized the earlier oligarchy was now rare. Things went from bad to worse. The reformers themselves helped to introduce three factors into Roman political life which hastened the end of the republic. The first was violation of the time restrictions on the tenure of office. The second was the use of violence to settle political disputes: riots, assassinations, and proscriptions. The third was the introduction of the military into politics, after the army ceased being a citizen militia and became voluntary and professional. The loyalty of such an army easily was attached to the general who raised it, led it to victory, gave it a good share of booty, and promised to win bonuses for it from the Senate. These armies were scarcely beholden to the Senate; in fact, as proletarians they despised it. Soon an independent political force, they enabled their leader, if successful in battle, to defy constituted authority almost at will. One after another of these leaders did just that, sometimes with the assistance of the Roman proletariat. The Senate, powerless before the generals, lost what little standing it had left as a responsible body.

The beginning of the climax which ended the republic was the refusal of Julius Caesar (c. 100 - 44 B. C.) to obey the Senate's order (49 B. C.) that he disband the army with which he had conquered Gaul and return home. Instead, he marched on Rome, defeated his political enemies, and emerged with enough titles (and with the power that went with them) to give him complete control of the republic. During the four remaining years of his life, Caesar initiated an enlightened program of reform at home and in the provinces. This program actually came to grips with many of the fundamental social, economic, and political problems that had long rocked the state; but it tacitly assumed that Caesar would become a despotic, if benevolent, king and that the republic would be transformed into a monarchy. The Roman populace warmly supported Caesar, but he made many enemies, especially among the Senatorial aristocracy. His murderers claimed that they were restoring the republic. If they were, they never had the opportunity to complete what they began. The grandnephew, adopted son, and heir of Caesar, a young man named Octavian, returned from the Balkans and found that he had to share power with two other men who were already on the spot. This situation he accepted for the moment, and within little more than a decade he stood alone at the helm of the Roman state. In the year 27 B. C. he went through the formality of resigning into the hands of the Senate all of the vast powers that had been entrusted to him. The Senate responded by conferring upon him control of important frontier provinces and an honorary title -- Augustus -- hitherto reserved for the gods.

Caesar Augustus (63 B. C. - A. D. 14) -- as Octavian is known from this point on -- came to power at a critical moment

in Roman history.¹ The republic had collapsed beneath the weight of empire and the efforts of a century to patch together something from the wreckage had failed ignominiously. Augustus proved that he was a true statesman, possessed of the tact and acumen which his predecessors had lacked. He realized that Rome wanted peace and order; that it did not demand great personal liberty; that the old Roman Republic could never again be restored, if there was to be order; that so conservative and proud a people as the Romans were still opposed to the establishment of a monarchy with himself, or anyone else, as king; and that therefore it would be wise and politic for him to preserve republican forms, tap as many sources of strength as possible from the past, and at the same time hold the realities of power in his own hands. Augustus had almost forty-five years of his life remaining in which to put his tact and acumen to the test. His organization of the Roman Empire -- which is commonly considered to have been founded in 27 B. C. -- was to last virtually intact for almost two centuries.

Although he drew freely upon the reforms inaugurated by Julius Caesar, Augustus did not tamper with the institutions of the republic. Tribunes, consuls, and other officials were still elected by the assemblies, but they were his candidates. Although from time to time he held many offices, he also resigned many and professed to prefer the title of princeps, or first citizen. Nevertheless, through the offices which he did retain he gathered to himself control of the finances, the burgeoning imperial bureaucracy, and the army (which took an oath of allegiance to him personally). What more was needed? Although the Senate was bereft of many of its former powers, once Augustus had succeeded in purging it thoroughly he went out of his way to associate it with him in governing the empire, a task for which he needed all of the help he could obtain. Aware of the fact that something had happened to weaken allegiance to what were considered the old republican virtues -- courage, seriousness, sobriety, duty to gods and state and family -- Augustus tried to set a good example by a simple private life, as simple as the wealthiest man in the empire could conveniently live. Furthermore, he attempted to restore the small Italian farmer, the strong ties which had characterized family life, and what was basically the old Roman religion. In these latter objectives, he met with little success.

Augustus eventually decided that the northern boundary of the empire should be the Rhine and the Danube Rivers, and that in the east it should approach Arabia and Mesopotamia. Where necessary, military campaigns were undertaken to secure these frontiers. Except in the east, people living beyond these boundaries were, by our definition, barbarians. Augustus divided this empire into about twenty-five provinces. He created

1 - All dates used in this chapter which are before Christ are identified with the abbreviation B. C. Except in this one instance, dates which are after Christ are used without further identification.

the first standing Roman army. It consisted of about 300,000 professional soldiers, most of whom were stationed along the frontiers. Responsibility for interior provinces was vested in the Senate, although in a dispute the last word would have been spoken by Augustus. He created a navy which proceeded to eliminate piracy from the Mediterranean. He began and his successors continued building a paid, career civil service, which, while its record never was perfect, now had both less reason and less opportunity for exploiting the provinces. Gradually the publicans were eliminated and the collection of taxes was turned over to this bureaucracy. Augustus also created an imperial post, which made it possible for him to communicate in record time with his officials in distant places.

The essence of Augustus' political achievement was this: he struck a balance among himself, the Senate, and the propertied classes (the aristocracy) of the cities of the empire. This balance was necessary, delicate, and, as it turned out, successful. The balance was necessary, since Augustus could not hope to create a highly centralized, unitary state such as ~~it~~ is possible to have in the twentieth century. The great cultural diversity within the empire (this includes the great variety of political life) and the enormous task of building the necessary bureaucracy would have rendered this an impossibility for more than one lifetime. The Roman Empire was and remained basically a collection of city-states joined together by the imperium of the emperor. The balance was delicate, since the respective spheres of the three elements were never clearly defined. Without a doubt, the emperor was the most powerful member of the coalition he had formed. This became increasingly evident in the reigns of Augustus' successors. But the success of his experiment depended on the mutual respect and confidence which it could generate. If these were lacking, and the emperor had to resort to the naked reality of armed force in governing, then the empire was no improvement upon the last century of the republic. The balance was successful, not interminably, but the reign of Augustus inaugurated two hundred years of relative peace in the Roman Empire, broken only by the more or less constant fighting with people living beyond the frontiers. In searching the pages of history we would be hard put to find any longer period of time in which a comparable group of civilized people has enjoyed peace and a similar degree of order. The Pax Romana (Roman peace) has been a haunting memory ever since.

Under the spread of the Roman eagle during the first two centuries of the Christian era there dwelt between 50,000,000 and 75,000,000 people. Many of them, particularly in the eastern Mediterranean, had highly developed political and economic institutions of their own, which were much older than the empire and more advanced than Roman institutions. Many of them, particularly in the western part of the empire, were only in the process of becoming civilized. The Romans provided their subjects with protection from external invasion and from internal lawlessness; acquainted them with public health facilities,

such as sewers and aqueducts; accommodated them with a well-built system of more than 50,000 miles of roads; provided them with a fairly equitable tax system and an adequate coinage; and maintained an economic policy (or the lack of one) which permitted a high degree of freedom of trade and commerce. For many years, the empire provided jobs in connection with building temples, forums, triumphal arches, sewers, aqueducts, and roads. Within this framework there was peace, economic prosperity, and, with only two main languages spoken (Latin and Greek), a lessening of cultural diversity.

All was never well within the Roman Empire. There were significant shortcomings which neither Augustus nor his successors were ever able to eliminate. There was no really satisfactory method of choosing the emperor -- perhaps under the circumstances there was none available. The fiction was long preserved that the figure we call the emperor was the princeps who received the imperium, not by heredity, but by the choice of the Senate. This raised the possibility of a crisis at the end of each reign. The specter of the army's becoming a determining factor in these crises was never removed. The proletariat of the city of Rome still lived on the bread provided by the state. Italy in general failed to keep pace in economic development with the eastern provinces. Elsewhere throughout the empire miserable poverty continued to exist along with the increasing wealth which the Pax Romana helped make possible for the upper classes.

The long Roman peace ended as the second century of the Christian era drew to a close. One of the worst emperors was assassinated in the year 192, the first one in almost a century to meet such a fate. During the period from 192 to 284 there were more than thirty emperors, of whom only two or three died natural deaths. Almost without exception these men were candidates put forth by one or another of the armies. Almost without exception they were fairly able men who tried to persuade the army to get on with its business: the now serious task of protecting the frontiers against outside pressures from the east and north. And, almost without exception, they were either murdered for their efforts or died fighting along with the army. The third century was clearly one of developing crisis. The grant of citizenship to practically all freemen in the year 212 takes on a significance other than the one which first comes to mind when it is realized that there were some taxes which only citizens paid. During the reign of Aurelian (270-275) it was felt necessary to rebuild the walls of the eternal city, which had long since fallen into disrepair. Other cities began looking to their own defenses.

In the midst of a revival of disorder on land and sea, of lands deserted and irrigation systems abandoned, there came to the throne in the year 284 a soldier of humble birth, named Diocletian (245-313). The changes which he and his immediate successors made in the imperial system were, like those of Augustus three centuries earlier, born of a need for order and

strength. Diocletian undertook a sweeping reorganization of the army and of the provinces, tightening imperial control all along the line and eliminating whatever remained of the distinction between Italy and the rest of the empire. He attempted to institute widespread economic controls in order to insure continued production of goods and services. These included price regulation, assigning farmers to their lands, and making certain trades obligatory and hereditary. The popular assemblies had long since ceased to function and by this time the Roman Senate had been reduced to the position of a nonentity. In an effort to elevate the office of emperor, which had been cheapened considerably in the preceding century, Diocletian took the title of dominus noster (our lord). He set himself apart from his subjects by withdrawing into his palace, clothing himself with robes of purple and gold, and surrounding himself with a rigid and elaborate ritual in harmony with his claim to divinity. Finally, he tackled the succession problem, but his solution broke down almost immediately after he voluntarily retired in the year 305, in order to put it into effect.