

# The Roman Empire

“The crowd broke into a roar...It was he who brought all this wealth and glory to Rome.”



## Rise of the Empire

Julius Caesar is gone. Who will rise as leader of Rome?

Civil war followed Caesar's death. Many fought for power over Rome, but there could only be one victor. Caesar's adopted nephew, **Octavian**, succeeded in gaining control of Rome. Octavian's rise to power was not an easy one. Even though Julius Caesar had declared Octavian his heir, Octavian did not have the support of the Senate. Octavian, being one of the richest men in Rome, used his wealth to persuade the Roman people. He was also able to raise an army to demonstrate his power to the Senate. Once Octavian gained the Senate's support, they gave him a new name **Caesar Augustus**, which means, "Honored One." Even though Augustus had a strained relationship with the Senate, he knew it was in his best interest to have the support of the Senate, instead of acting like a king. The Senate and the people were so grateful for Rome's peace and prosperity that they gave Augustus as much power as he wanted.

## Pax Romana

The reign of Caesar Augustus marked the beginning of peace and prosperity in the Roman Empire. Romans refer to this time of peace as “Pax Romana,” which translates to “Roman Peace.” The Pax Romana would last for over 200 years.



**Above:** Caesar Augustus, the first emperor of Rome. “Caesar” would go on to mean “Emperor.”

**Left:** Rome at the height of its power

## All Roads Lead to Rome

To help maintain their growing empire, the Romans built an extensive system of roads. These durable roads would carry Roman **legions**, groups of about 6,000 Roman soldiers, and serve as way for Roman territories to communicate with each other.

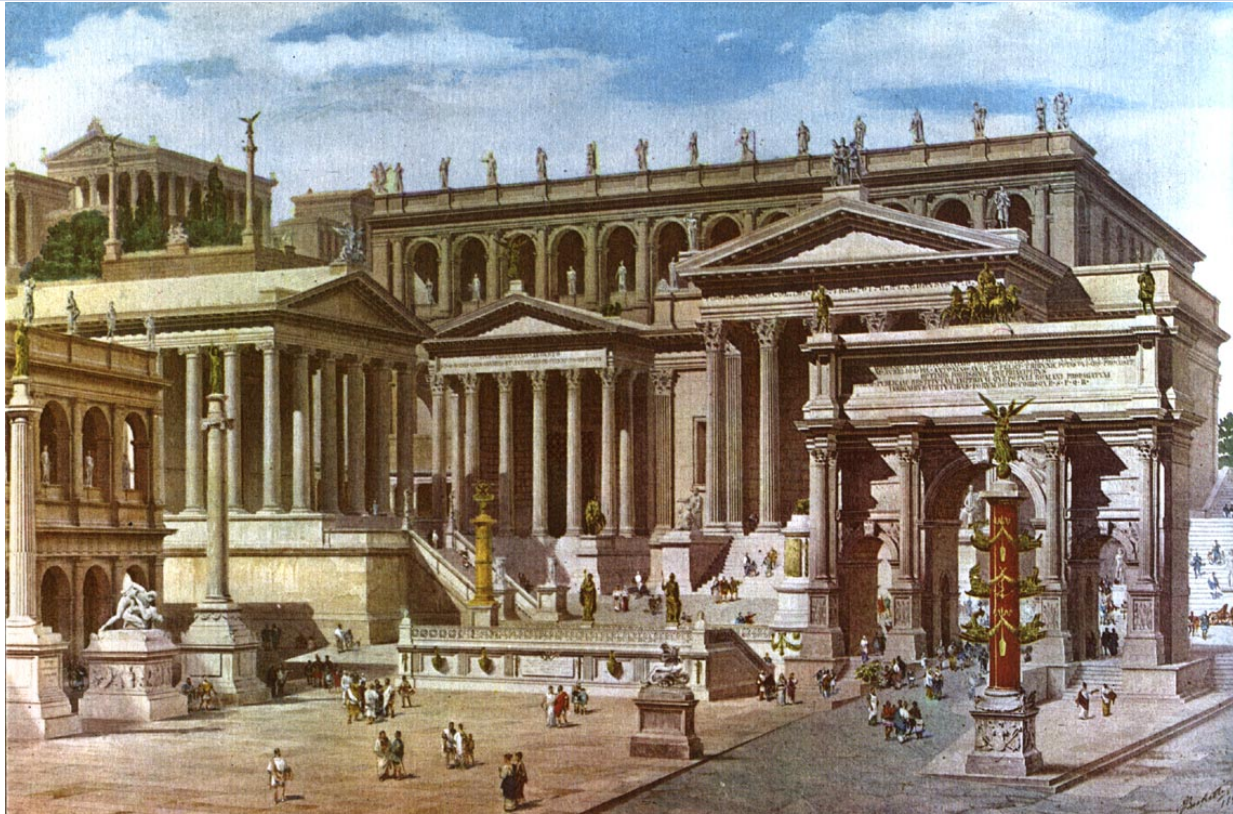


## Roman Aqueducts

During this time, Romans were able to make great advances in technology and architecture, all while expanding their territory. A notable Roman achievement is **aqueduct** which is a water bridge used to bring water into Rome. Romans would build nine aqueducts, which would provide Romans with up to 38







## Roman Daily Life

“Before it gets light, we have the bakers. Then it’s the hammering of the artisans all day. There’s no peace or quiet in this city!”

At the height of its power, Rome had the most beautiful monuments and public buildings in the ancient world. Wealth and goods poured into the city. The Roman **forum**, marketplace, had more goods than any other city.

### **The Rich, the Poor, and the Slaves:**

Roman society was made up of the few rich, the many poor, and the slaves. Most citizens did not enjoy a life of luxury. A majority of Romans were poor and jobless. They were only able to survive through handouts from the Roman government. The world of the poor was vastly different than the world of the wealthy. In Rome, most people lived in

poor housing. Many lived in tall apartment houses with no running water, toilets, or a kitchen. All of their food and drink had to be carried up the stairs. Most trash and human waste was thrown out the window.

Poor citizens also needed wheat to survive. If there was a bad harvest or a wheat shipment was late, the poor would riot. This forced the emperors to provide free grain to the poor.

### **A Life of Luxury**

The rich had marvelous homes in the city. They also had county estates called **villas**. Some wealthy families had large estates where a majority of the empire's food would be grown.

## Roman Entertainment

Many Roman emperors would provide entertainment to the poor and Rome's citizens.

Roman emperors would hold spectacular shows in the **Colosseum**, a giant arena located near the Roman forum, or in smaller arenas called **circuses**. The shows would eventually be called "circuses." These circuses could be violent. Romans, both rich and poor, would pack into the arenas to watch the events. The events included animals fighting other animals, animals fighting humans, and humans fighting

humans. Clowns could also be used for entertainment. There would sometimes be a public execution of a criminal.

The most popular event of the day would be the fights between the **gladiators**, men who fought to the death. Most gladiators were slaves who had been captured in battle. In some instances, gladiators were freed men—and sometimes women who enjoyed the fame and fortune that came with being a gladiator.

Before the battles, the gladiators would parade into the center of the arena. They would approach the emperor's box with their arms raised in salute to the emperor. They would recite "Hail Caesar! We who are about to die salute you!" This would mark the beginning of the battle.

A wounded gladiator's life could be spared if he fought valiantly. The emperor would raise his thumb meaning, "Spare the loser." A thumb pointed down meant death.



**Above:** Even our own society had found gladiator battles entertaining. The scene above is from the movie **Gladiator** (MacDonald, L., & Scott, R. (2000). *Gladiator* United States: Dreamworks & Universal)



**Above:** Painting of Roman gladiators fighting in the arena.



## The Rise of Christianity

Over time, a new religion emerges in the Roman Empire. This religion was practiced among the poor and the slaves. Roman rulers began to fear Christianity as it spread throughout the empire. Many Roman rulers attempted to stop the spread of Christianity by killing its followers.

### The Beginnings of Christianity:

The Roman Empire would allow its conquered people to practice their own religions as long as they paid their respect to the Roman gods and goddesses. Over time, this sentiment would change.

The Roman conquered the Jewish homeland of Judea in 63 BCE. At first, Romans respected the Jews' right to worship their own God. But many Jews resented foreign rule. They believed that a **messiah**, or savior, would come bring justice to the land.

It was during this time that **Jesus** was born in the town of Bethlehem. Most of what we know about Jesus' life is found in the **New Testament** of the **Bible**. After his death, his **disciples**, or followers, told stories about his life and teaching. People came to believe that four disciples—Matthew, Mark, John, and Luke—had each written one story. These stories are known as the **Gospels**.

According to the Gospels, Jesus taught that there was only one true God. He said that this God was loving and forgiving. He said that a person had the responsibility to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus also claimed he was the Son of God and the Messiah. He promised that if people believed in him and followed his teachings they would have everlasting life.

### Christianity Spreads

The fast growing new religion soon alarmed the Roman government. Christians began to refuse to worship Roman gods or the emperor. Many Roman officials began to view Christians as a threat to the empire. Under the emperor Nero, the first official campaign against the Christians began in 64 CE. One night a terrible fire breaks out, leaving the city in ruins. Nero uses this opportunity to place blame on the Christians. Rumor has it that it was Nero who set fire to Rome in order to build a grand palace.

The Romans would continue to torment Christians off and on for another 250 years. With Roman emperors so focused on putting a stop to the Christian religion, they barely noticed their empire crumbling around them.



**Left:** Roman emperor Constantine would be the first emperor of Rome to accept Christianity as a religion. He would go on to make it the official religion of the Roman Empire.

## The Fall of Rome

By the time Emperor Constantine comes into power, there was little he could do to keep the empire from crumbling. The real trouble started about 125 years ago when the last of the “good” Roman emperors died, Marcus Aurelius. Upon his death, Marcus’ son Commodus took the throne. Commodus was an evil man who took pleasure in watching the bloodshed of the gladiators. The rule of Commodus marks the beginning of the decline of the Roman Empire. Historians cannot agree on any one cause for the decline. There were several problems leading to the fall of Rome.

### Weak and Corrupt Rulers

After Commodus, emperors were mainly successful generals, not politicians. They would often steal money from Rome’s treasury and use it for their own personal gain. They would also use their wealth to bribe soldiers in their armies. Under these emperors, the government and the Roman economy fell to pieces. The senate lost all power it previously held. Even the Roman emperor was not safe. During this time of turmoil Rome had 29 emperors most were murdered.

### A Mercenary Army

During the early days of the Roman Empire, armies were made up of citizens ready to defend their lands. Now, the Roman army was made up of **mercenaries**, foreign soldiers who serve only for pay. The problem with this method was that mercenaries do not fight for a cause; they fight for the highest bidder. Mercenaries would often switch sides during crucial moments in battle.

### The Size of the Empire

The Roman Empire had grown so much that it was almost impossible to rule the land from a single location. All over the empire, in Asia, Africa, and northern Europe, enemies of the Roman Empire began to attack. Tribes that had once been defeated by Rome were taking back their lands with ease.

### Serious Economic Problems

When Rome lost the ability to conquer new lands, they lost the ability to collect new wealth from conquered nations. This meant that the taxes on Roman citizens increased. Rome was also operating under limited resources. Severe unemployment was also an issue. Food was hard to come by which made the price of food rise. To pay for food, the government decided to make more money in the form of coins. The value of these coins depended on the amount of silver in them, but the government did not have much silver so they put less into each coin. This did create more money, but the money had less value. This situation is called **inflation**.

### Rome Falls

Constantine had struggled to keep the empire together. He moves the capital to Byzantium, and the city is renamed Constantinople in his honor. The Eastern part of the Roman Empire is able to live on and eventually becomes the Byzantine Empire. The rest of the Roman Empire is taken over by invading Germanic tribes, or **barbarians**.