

The Roman Republic

753 BC to 31 BC

Before Rome became an empire that conquered the known world (146 BC), it was a Republic of Roman people that lived in Italy and became the great model for the republic built by the Founders of America. Of the world's five great empires (mentioned in Daniel's scroll), the Romans became the most powerful.

1. The Assyrian Empire (911-609 BC)
2. The Babylonian Empire (609-539 BC)
3. The Persian Empire (539-333 BC)
4. The Grecian Empire (333-146 BC)
5. The Roman Empire (146 BC-AD 476)

While the great civilization of Greece was in decline, a new city to the west was developing and increasing its power. Rome went from being one of many city-states in the Italian Peninsula the most powerful empire in the world after the fall of the Grecian Empire. Rome was able to gain its empire in large part by extending some form of citizenship to many of the people it conquered (Acts 16:37-38; 22:25-28). Military expansion drove economics, bringing enslaved people and the loot back to Rome, transforming the city. How did Rome go from being one of *many city-states* in the Italian peninsula the most powerful empire?

Ancient History

The city of Rome was founded, according to Roman legend, in **753 B.C.** by Romulus and Remus, twin sons of the god Mars and a Latin princess. The twins were abandoned on the Tiber River as infants and raised by a she-wolf. The twins decided to build a city near the spot. In reality, it was men and not immortals who built the city, and they chose the spot largely for its strategic location and fertile soil. Rome's Geography Rome was built on seven rolling hills at a curve on the Tiber River, near the center of the Italian peninsula. It was midway between the Alps and Italy's southern tip. Rome also was near the midpoint of the Mediterranean Sea. From about 1000 to 500 B.C., three groups inhabited the region and eventually battled for control. They were the Latins, the Greeks, and the *Etruscans*. The Latins built the original settlement at Rome, a cluster of wooden huts atop one of its seven hills, Palatine Hill.

Political Institutions

According to Roman tradition, the Republic began in **509 BCE** (the Temple in Jerusalem was rededicated in 516 BC). The last king of Rome was **Tarquin the Proud**. A harsh tyrant, he was driven from power in 509 B.C. by Roman citizens. The Romans declared they would never again be ruled by a king. Instead, they established a republic, from the Latin phrase *res publica*, which means "*public affairs*."

A Republic is a form of government where power rests with citizens who have the right to vote.

In Rome, citizenship with voting rights was granted *only to free-born male citizens*. The Romans replaced the king with two **consuls**—rulers who had many of the same powers as the king but were elected to serve one-year terms. Each consul could **veto**, or reject, the actions of the other consul. Although the office of consul probably did not exist in its final form until around **300 B.c.**, the idea behind this change—to *prevent any one man from becoming too powerful*—was present early on in Roman thought and shaped many of Rome's political institutions.

The Patricians and the Plebeians

Roman political institutions reflected Roman society, which was divided into two classes: the **patricians**, wealthy elites, and the **plebeians**, the common people. Initially, only the patricians were able to hold political office and make important decisions. For example, plebeians could not join the Roman **Senate**, an advisory body unable to create laws on its own but whose recommendations were taken seriously by the consuls. To become a senator, a Roman had to have held a political office, and plebeians could not.

Over time, however, the plebeians were able to gain more influence in the political system. Between the years 494 and 287 B.C. new political offices for plebeians were created and access to higher office, including the consulship, was opened to them. Voting assemblies and councils were established that gave plebeians more say in the politics of Rome. However, the Roman political structures limit the influence of the poor? The Roman military was built around legions of soldiers (5,000) broken down into the **Comitia Centuriata**, units of 100 soldiers ruled by a Roman centurion. Men were divided into classes based on their wealth because soldiers had to provide their own equipment. Only wealthy Romans could afford high-quality weapons and armor, which made them more effective soldiers. Men without property were not eligible for military service and these poorest Romans, though the largest class in numbers, were placed into the smallest number of centuries for voting. Part of the reason that the Romans saw no problem with allowing the wealthy to have greater political influence was because they believed that those who had the most wealth also had the most to lose from Roman defeat, so the wealthy had better motivation to be good soldiers and a better sense of what was good policy for Rome.

Like all ancient societies, Rome's economy was based on agriculture, which was incredibly labor intensive. As Rome fought more foreign wars, many small landholders were away serving in the military for longer periods. If they failed to return or their farms went bankrupt in their absence, wealthy Romans bought their land, creating larger and larger farms, known as latifundia. Further, it was common practice to enslave and sell war captives; the increasing number of military conquests brought many enslaved people into the Italian peninsula. Because of economies of scale and because enslaved people could be made to work longer and harder than free Romans, this trend further increased economic production. The increased income from expansion supported development by creating demand for greater supplies of agricultural produce. Some owners of large farms even switched from growing staple grains to high-value crops, such as olives and grapes, or raising animals—this wouldn't be an option for small family farms.

Expanding Power

Roman power grew slowly but steadily as the legions battled for control of the Italian peninsula. By the fourth century B.C., the Romans dominated central Italy. Eventually, they defeated the Etruscans to the north and the Greek city states to the south. By 265 B.C., the Romans were masters of nearly all Italy. Rome had different laws and treatment for different parts of its conquered territory. The neighboring Latins on the Tiber became full citizens of Rome. In territories farther from Rome, conquered peoples enjoyed all the rights of Roman citizenship except the vote. All other conquered groups fell into a third category, allies of Rome. Rome did not interfere with its allies, as long as they supplied troops for the Roman army and did not make treaties of friendship with any other state.

Rome's Commercial Network

Rome's location gave it easy access to the riches of the lands ringing the Mediterranean Sea. Roman merchants moved by land and sea. They traded Roman wine and olive oil for a variety of foods, raw

materials, and manufactured goods from other lands. However, other large and powerful cities interfered with Roman access to the Mediterranean. One such city was Carthage. Once a colony of Phoenicia, Carthage was located on a peninsula on the North African coast. Its rise to power soon put it in direct opposition with Rome. The rising power of Carthage and the declining power of Greece were the greatest threats to the new empire of Rome.

Wars with Carthage and Greece

In 264 B.C., Rome and Carthage went to war. This was the beginning of the long struggle known as the Punic Wars. Between 264 and 146 B.C., Rome and Carthage fought three wars. The first, for control of Sicily and the western Mediterranean, lasted 23 years (264–241 B.C.). It ended in the defeat of Carthage. The Second Punic War began in 218 B.C. The mastermind behind the war was a 29-year-old Carthaginian general named Hannibal. Hannibal was a brilliant military strategist who wanted to avenge Carthage's earlier defeat.

Hannibal assembled an army of 50,000 infantry, 9,000 cavalry, and 60 elephants with the intent of capturing Rome. Instead of a head-on attack, however, Hannibal sought to surprise the Romans with a most daring and risky move. He led his army on a long trek from Spain across France and through the Alps. Despite losing more than half his men and most of his elephants, the general's move initially worked. For more than a decade, he marched his forces up and down the Italian peninsula at will. Hannibal won his greatest victory at Cannae, in 216 B.C. There his army inflicted enormous losses on the Romans. However, the Romans regrouped and with the aid of many allies stood firm. They stopped Hannibal in his tracks.

The Romans had found a daring military leader to match Hannibal's boldness. A general named Scipio devised a plan to attack Carthage. This strategy forced Hannibal to return to defend his native city. In 202 B.C., at Zama near Carthage, the Romans finally defeated Hannibal. During the Third Punic War (149–146 B.C.), Rome laid siege to Carthage. In 146 B.C., the city was set afire and its 50,000 inhabitants sold into slavery. Its territory was made a Roman province. Rome's victories in the Punic Wars gave it dominance over the western Mediterranean. The Romans then went on to conquer the eastern half.

That same year, Rome destroyed the Greek city of Corinth (146 BC). The Roman Republic had now become the world's largest empire. By about 70 B.C., Rome's Mediterranean empire stretched from Anatolia in the east to Spain in the west.

The Beginning of the Fall of the Roman Republic

As Rome enlarged its territory, its republican form of government grew increasingly unstable. Eventually, the Roman Republic gave way to the formation of a mighty dictator-ruled empire that continued to spread Rome's influence far and wide. The Republic Collapses Rome's increasing wealth and expanding boundaries brought many problems. The most serious were growing discontent among the lower classes of society and a breakdown in military order. These problems led to a shakeup of the republic—and the emergence of a new political system. Economic Turmoil As Rome grew, the gap between rich and poor grew wider. Many of Rome's rich landowners lived on huge estates. Thousands of enslaved persons—many of whom had been captured peoples in various wars—were forced to work on these estates.

By 100 B.C., enslaved persons formed perhaps one-third of Rome's population. Small farmers found it difficult to compete with the large estates run by the labor of enslaved people. Many of these farmers were former soldiers. Many sold their lands to wealthy landowners and became homeless and jobless.

Most stayed in the countryside and worked as seasonal migrant laborers. Some headed to Rome and other cities looking for work. They joined the ranks of the urban poor, a group that totaled about one-fourth of Roman society. Two brothers, Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus attempted to help Rome's poor. Tiberius spoke eloquently about the plight of the landless former soldiers:

The savage beasts have their . . . dens, . . . but the men who bear arms and expose their lives for the safety of their country, enjoy . . . nothing more in it but the air and light . . . and wander from place to place with their wives and children.

TIBERIUS GRACCHUS quoted in Plutarch, *The Lives of Noble Greeks and Romans*

The brothers made enemies of numerous senators, who felt threatened by their ideas. Both met violent deaths—Tiberius in 133 B.C. and Gaius in 121 B.C.

A period of civil war, or conflict between groups within the same country, followed their deaths. Military Upheaval Adding to the growing turmoil within the republic was a breakdown of the once-loyal military. As the republic grew more unstable, generals began seizing greater power for themselves. They recruited soldiers from the landless poor by promising them land. These soldiers fought for pay and owed allegiance only to their commander. They replaced the citizen-soldiers whose loyalty had been to the republic. It now was possible for a military leader supported by his own troops to take over by force.

Julius Caesar Takes Control In 60 B.C.

A military leader named Julius Caesar joined forces with Crassus, a wealthy Roman, and Pompey, a popular general. With their help, Caesar was elected consul in 59 B.C. For the next ten years, these men dominated Rome as a triumvirate, a group of three rulers. Caesar was a strong leader and a genius at military strategy. Following tradition, he served only one year as consul. He then appointed himself governor of Gaul (now France). During 58–50 B.C., Caesar led his legions in a grueling but successful campaign to conquer all of Gaul. Because he shared fully in the hardships of war, he won his men's loyalty and devotion.

The reports of Caesar's successes in Gaul made him very popular with the people of Rome. Pompey, who had become his political rival, feared Caesar's ambitions. In 50 B.C., the senate, at Pompey's urgings, ordered Caesar to disband his legions and return home. Caesar defied the senate's order. On the night of January 10, 49 B.C., he took his army across the Rubicon River in Italy, the southern limit of the area he commanded. He marched his army swiftly toward Rome, and Pompey fled. Caesar's troops defeated Pompey's armies in Greece, Asia, Spain, and Egypt.

In 46 B.C., Caesar returned to Rome, where he had the support of the army and the masses. That same year, the senate appointed him dictator. In 44 B.C., *Julius Caesar was named dictator of Rome for life*. Caesar governed as an absolute ruler, one who has total power. However, he started a number of reforms. He granted Roman citizenship to many people in the provinces. He expanded the senate, adding friends and supporters from Italy and other regions. Caesar also helped the poor by creating jobs, especially through the construction of new public buildings. He started colonies where people without land could own property, and he increased pay for soldiers.

Many nobles and senators expressed concern over Caesar's growing power, success, and popularity. Some feared losing their influence. Others considered him a tyrant. Several important senators, led by Marcus Brutus and Gaius Cassius, plotted his assassination. On **March 15, 44 B.C.**, they stabbed Caesar to death in the senate chamber.

(Source: Class Zone – The Roman Empire)