

# Roman Empire

The Roman Empire was one of the most powerful empires that the western world had ever seen. Preceding from the Roman Republic in 27 BC and lasting until 476 AD, it left a tangible political, social and cultural legacy that is still seen to this day.

This article will discuss in great detail about the Roman Empire within the context of the IAS Exam.

## Origins of the Roman Empire

The origins of the Roman Empire can be traced back to the founding of the city of Rome in 753. According to legend, the city was founded by two brothers Romulus and Remus. Abandoned to die by their uncle on the banks of the river Tiber, they were rescued by a she-wolf. They were found and later raised by a shepherd. In order to repay her kindness, Romulus and Remus vowed to build a city in her honour, on the Palatine Hill where they were found. In a quarrel about the city boundaries, Remus was killed and Romulus became the first king of Rome giving his name to the city.

From Humble Beginnings as a small group of villages, Rome would go on to become the magnificent capital of the most powerful empire of the ancient world.

At first, Rome was ruled by kings. Then in 509 BC, King Tarquin the Proud was expelled from Rome and for the next 500 years Rome became a republic.

## The Roman Republic Era

Beginning in 509 BC the Roman Republic embarked on a series of expansion and wars to become the paramount power of the Italian peninsula. Defeating other Italian tribes such as the Samnites, Etruscans and Greek Colonies in Southern Italy, the republic expanded beyond the confines of Rome in the ensuing years. By 264 BC it had control over most of central and southern Italy.

It was at this time that the Roman Republic came into conflict with another Mediterranean power of the time - Carthage.

Beginning in 264 BC, Rome fought a series of wars known as the Punic Wars with Carthage. A total three were fought between the two in which the Republic of Rome gained Spain, Sicily, Northern Italy and parts of Northern Africa. The Punic Wars ended in 146 BC with the destruction of Carthage. Rome would go on to dominate other European powers as well as destroying the Greek City-states and the powerful Seleucid Empire by about 50 BC But all was not well politically.

When the republic came into existence power passed into the hands of the Senate, a law-making body made up of important nobles and headed by two senior officials, called consuls. They were elected every year to manage the affairs of the state and the Roman Army. as time went on a rivalry between army generals, the rich and the poor plunged Rome into a bloody civil war. At the helm of it was Julius Ceaser who had ceased power and was on the way to become an emperor before his assassination in 44 BC. Despite this, the republic crumbled and in 27 BC Octavian, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, became the first Roman emperor, charged with restoring peace and stability to Rome. With his ascension, the Roman Empire was born.

## The Reign of the Emperors

Octavian, now Emperor Augustus Caesar, set about a series of reforms which stabilized the economy of post-civil war Rome. With the exception of a few, most of the Emperors saw a remarked growth and prosperity along with the territorial extension of the empire extending from Britain to modern-day Syria. The era from 27 BC to 180 AD is known as '*Pax Romana*' or Roman Peace. Upon the death of Emperor Marcus Aurelius in 180 AD, Rome was plunged into an era of chaos due to mismanagement by his successor Commodus.

The Crisis of the 3rd Century (235 AD - 285 AD) was marked by a period of anarchy, civil wars, barbarian invasions and political instability which brought about a near-collapse of the empire. It was only upon the ascension of Emperor Diocletian when the crisis was truly over. Knowing that the administrative difficulties in maintaining a large empire were impractical and difficult. In 286 AD, the Empire was divided into a western half and eastern half. The Western Roman Empire would be governed from Rome while the Eastern Roman Empire would be governed from Byzantium.

But the after-effects of the crisis would still continue to plague both the empires well into the 4th century. Dynastic intrigues and even military coups would be the norm after the death of Diocletian. Further, the crisis had weakened the Roman army to an extent and had left its border with the barbarian tribes to the North and East of the empire severely vulnerable. The Goths, a Germanic tribe, would rampage across the empire beginning in 395 AD. Sacking Greece and the Balkans in the Eastern Roman Empire, they were bribed by the Eastern Romans towards the west.

The Goths would sack Rome in 410 AD. This was serious damage to the prestige of the Roman Empire and never again would it rise to its former glory. Rome would see more barbarian invasions from the likes of the Huns and the Vandals, the latter sacking Rome in 455 AD. Finally the last Western Roman Emperor, Romulus Augustus would be deposed by Odoacer, a Germanic chief in 476 AD. The Roman Empire in the east would continue as the Byzantine Empire until its conquest by the Ottoman Turks in 1453 AD.

## Military of the Roman Empire

The amazing expansion and success of the Roman Empire was largely attributed to its army, the best trained and the best equipped in the ancient world at the time

At first, the Roman Army was founded to protect the city of Rome and was largely made up of volunteer soldiers. Under the leadership of the general and consul, Marius (155 - 86 BC), the Army was reorganised into a more disciplined and more efficient fighting force. Soldiers were paid wages and joined up for 20 to 25 years. For many young men from good families, the army provided a stepping stone for political success.

In the Army itself, ordinary soldiers were grouped into units called legions, each made up of about 5000 men. The legions, in turn, were made up of smaller units called centuries of 80 men commanded by officers called centurions. The sight of the Roman army marching in battle behind their standards topped by a silver eagle (symbol of Jupiter, king of the gods) was enough to strike fear into the staunchest of Rome's enemies.

## Roman Society

Roman society was divided into citizens and non-citizens. There were three classes of citizens - *patricians*, the richest and the most influential aristocrats; *equites*, the wealthy merchants and *plebeians*, the ordinary citizens or 'commoners'. All citizens were allowed to vote in elections and to serve in the army. Non-citizens included provincials, people who lived outside of Rome itself but in territory under Roman rule, and slaves. Slaves had no rights or status. They were owned by wealthy citizens or by the government and did all the hardest and dirtiest jobs on which the Roman Empire heavily relied.

Many slaves were treated cruelly but some were well looked after, and even paid a wage so that they could eventually buy their freedom. Most upper-class Roman followed careers in politics or in the army. Poorer citizens worked as farmers, shopkeepers or craft workers. The building, mining and all hard, manual labour was done by the vast workforce of slaves