

# Ancient Rome and Early Christianity, 500 B.C.—A.D. 500

## Summary

**CHAPTER OVERVIEW** *The Romans make a republic in Italy and rise to power, but the internal struggle for control of their growing strength changes the government to an empire. The empire enjoys a long period of peace, during which a new religion, Christianity, arises. The empire finally collapses in the western part, but Rome leaves a legacy of many important ideas and achievements.*

## 1 The Romans Create a Republic

**KEY IDEA** *The early Romans made a republic. It grew in power and spread its influence.*

The city of Rome was founded by the Latin people on a river in the center of Italy. It was a good location, which gave them the chance to control all of Italy. It put them in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. Two other groups lived in what is now Italy: the Greeks in the south, and the Etruscans in the north. The Romans borrowed some ideas from both peoples.

About 600 B.C., an Etruscan king ruled over his people and Rome. By this time, Rome had grown to be a wealthy and large city. The Romans resented the Etruscan rule. In 509 B.C., they finally overthrew the king. They declared that Rome would be a republic. The people would have the power to vote to choose the leaders of the government. They said that Rome would never again have a king.

Two groups struggled for power in the new republic—the nobles and the common people. At first, the nobles dominated the government. Over time, the common people won more rights. The basis for Roman law was a set of rules called the Twelve Tables. They said that all free citizens were protected by law. They were posted in a public place for all to see.

The government had three parts. Two consuls were elected each year to lead the government and the army. A person could not become consul a second time until after ten years had passed. In this way, the Romans hoped to prevent one person from having too much power. The second important part of the government was the Senate. It began by choosing 100 members from the upper classes. Later its size was expanded and some members were common people. The Senate passed laws. There were also assemblies that all people belonged to. They made laws that applied to all

their members. All free-born males were citizens and had the right to vote. Any citizen who owned property had to serve in the army.

In the fourth century B.C., Rome began to expand. Within 150 years, it had captured almost all of Italy. Rome allowed some of the conquered peoples to enjoy the benefits of citizenship. With its good location, Rome saw a growth in trade. This brought it into conflict with Carthage, a trading city in North Africa.

From 264 to 146 B.C., Rome and Carthage fought three bitter wars. In the first, Rome won control of the island of Sicily. In the second, an army from Carthage caused great destruction in Italy, although Rome itself was spared. In the third, Rome defeated Carthage once again and completely destroyed the city. In another few decades, Rome also conquered Greece, Macedonia, Spain, and parts of modern Turkey. It controlled the Mediterranean Sea.

## 2 The Roman Empire Brings Change

**KEY IDEA** *Rome became an empire. Its government, society, economy, and culture changed.*

Rome's victory brought conflict between rich and poor. When two brothers tried to pass laws that would help the poor, they were killed. Then Rome erupted in a civil war as leading generals fought for power.

Julius Caesar tried to take control. First he joined with two others—Crassius, a wealthy man, and Pompey, a successful general. For the next ten years, these three led Rome. Caesar gained fame with several victories in battle. Pompey now feared Caesar, and the two fought another civil war that lasted several years. After he won, Caesar took charge of the government. He made many changes that added to his popularity. However, he raised the

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mistrust of some members of the Senate who feared he wanted to become king. A group of them killed him.

Once again Rome suffered civil war. The winner was the nephew of Caesar, who took over the government of Rome. He had the title Augustus, meaning "exalted one." The Roman Empire was now ruled by one man.

For about 200 years, through bad emperors and good, the Roman Empire was a great power. Its population of between 60 and 80 million enjoyed peace and prosperity. The empire stretched around the Mediterranean, from modern Syria and Turkey west and north to England and Germany. It depended on farming, which employed 90 percent of all workers. Trade was also important, bringing silk from China. Goods traveled by ship and along the Roman roads.

Defending all these people were the soldiers of the army. These included some troops recruited from the conquered peoples. Once they finished their time in the army, they became Roman citizens. This way, the empire extended its benefits to more and more people. Running the empire were government officials who reported to the emperor.

The quality of life in the empire depended on social position. The wealthy had rich lives full of luxury and huge meals. The poor—including many people in Rome itself—had no jobs and received handouts of food from the government. The government also entertained them, paying for spectacular—and bloody—shows of combat in public arenas.

About a third of the people in the empire were slaves. They were usually people from a land that had been conquered by the army. Many times slaves tried to organize a revolt to win their freedom, but they never could succeed.

Adult women enjoyed more rights in Rome than in other ancient cultures. They could own property and testify in court—although they could not vote. Parents thought it better to have a boy child than a girl.

### **3 The Rise of Christianity**

**KEY IDEA** *Christianity arose in the eastern part of the empire and spread throughout Roman lands.*

One of the groups whose land was taken into the empire was the Jews. Many Jews wanted to rid their land of the Romans. Others hoped for the coming of the Messiah—the savior. According

to tradition, God promised that the Messiah would restore the kingdom of the Jews. In this time, Jesus was born.

At age 30, Jesus began to travel the countryside preaching his message of the love of God. According to close followers, he performed many miracles. He taught that those who regretted their sins would enter an eternal kingdom after death. His fame grew, and many people thought him the long-awaited Messiah.

Jewish church leaders did not believe that his teachings were those of God. Roman leaders feared his hold on the people. Jesus was arrested and sentenced to death. After his death, his followers said that he had appeared to them again and then gone to heaven. They said this proved he was the Messiah. They called him "Christ," which is Greek for "savior," and his followers came to be called Christians.

At first his followers were all Jewish. Later, under one follower, Paul, the Christians began to look to all people, even non-Jews, to join the church. The leaders of the early church traveled throughout the empire spreading the teachings of Jesus.

From time to time, Roman leaders tried to punish the Christians. They were angered when Christians refused to worship the Roman gods. Romans had them put to death or killed by wild animals in the arena. However, the religion spread until, after almost 200 years, millions of people across the empire believed. It spread because it accepted all believers, whether rich or poor, man or woman. It gave hope to those without power. It appealed to people who were bothered by the lack of morality in Roman life. It won followers because it offered a personal relationship with God and the promise of life after death.

As the early church grew, it developed an official structure. Priests led small groups of worshippers in individual churches. Bishops, based in most major cities, controlled all the churches in their area. The bishop of Rome headed the church.

In A.D. 313, Christianity entered a new era. The Roman emperor Constantine said that Christians would no longer be persecuted. He gave his official approval to Christianity. A few decades later, it became the empire's official religion. While Christianity grew in power, it also felt some growing pains. Church leaders sometimes disagreed over basic beliefs and argued about them. From time to time they met in councils to settle these matters.

## 4 The Decline of the Roman Empire

**KEY IDEA** *The empire became weakened by internal problems and bothered by the arrival of warlike nomads. The empire was divided and later fell apart.*

Beginning about A.D. 180, Rome entered a period of decline. It suffered economic problems. Trade slowed as raiders threatened the ships and caravans that carried goods over sea and land. The supply of gold and silver went down, and the price of goods increased. Food supplies dropped as tired soil, warfare, and high taxes cut the amount of grain and other foods produced on farms. On top of that, the empire had military problems. German tribes caused trouble on the frontiers while Roman generals fought one another for control of the empire.

After a century of these problems, a new emperor, Diocletian, took the throne. He passed many new laws trying to fix the economy. He tried to restore the status of the emperor by naming himself a son of the chief Roman god. He even divided the empire into eastern and western halves to make it easier to govern. Many of these changes were continued by Constantine, who in 324 became emperor of both halves of the empire. A few years later, Constantine moved the capital of the empire to a new city in northwestern Turkey where Europe met Asia.

These reforms delayed the end of the Roman Empire but could not prevent its fall. The eastern part of the empire remained strong and unified, but in the west trouble continued. German tribes moved into the empire, all of them trying to escape fierce warriors—Mongol nomads from Central Asia—that were moving into their land. These were the Huns, and their arrival helped bring about the end of Rome. The Roman armies in the west collapsed, and German armies twice entered Rome itself, looting and burning the once-great city. After the death in 453 of their leader, Attila, the Huns went back to central Asia. However, the Germans had arrived for good. By 476 there were German people living in many areas of Europe. That year a German general removed the last western Roman emperor from the throne.

## 5 Rome and the Roots of Western Civilization

**KEY IDEA** *The Romans developed many ideas and institutions that have become part of Western civilization.*

Rome took features of Greek culture and added ideas of its own. This combination of influences helped shape Europe and the Western world.

Roman sculpture, for instance, borrowed Greek practices but with a difference. Roman statues were more realistic. Romans perfected a kind of sculpture in which images stood out three-dimensionally from a flat background. Romans made pictures from tiny tiles, a process called mosaic, and enjoyed wall painting. Roman writing was based on Greek models, too.

Romans became famous for their skill at engineering. They used arches and domes to build large, impressive buildings. Many of these forms are still used today. They also built an excellent system of roads and built several aqueducts to carry water from distant lakes or rivers to large cities.

Rome left another mark on the world. Many languages, from Spanish to Romanian, are based on Latin. Even languages such as English have many words taken from Latin.

Rome's most lasting influence, though, was in setting certain standards of law that still influence people today. These include the ideas that

- all persons should be treated equally by the law;
- a person should be thought innocent of a crime until proven guilty;
- someone who accuses another person of a crime has to prove it; and
- a person should be punished only for actions, not for thoughts or opinions.

## Review

### *Making Generalizations*

1. Describe the government of the republic.
2. Describe the empire during the long time of peace.
3. **Recognizing Main Idea** What important change did Paul make to Christianity?
4. **Recognizing Facts and Details** How did Diocletian try to fix the empire?
5. **Making Judgments** Give two examples of principles of Roman law that still influence people today.