Ancient Rome was a civilization based on the city of Rome. It lasted for about 800 years. Rome is traditionally said to have been founded as a kingdom in 753 BC. Following the expulsion of its last king, Tarquinius Superbus, the monarchy became a republic (traditionally in 509 BC). From then, its history is one of almost continual expansion until the murder of Julius Caesar and the foundation of the Roman Empire in 27 BC under Augustus and his successors.

At its peak under Trajan, the empire stretched from Roman Britain to Mesopotamia and the Caspian Sea. A long line of emperors ruling by virtue of military, rather than civil, power marked the beginning of Rome's long decline; under Diocletian the empire was divided into two parts – East and West – although it was temporarily reunited under Constantine, the first emperor to formally adopt Christianity. The end of the Roman Empire is generally dated by the removal of the last emperor in the West in 476. The Eastern or Byzantine Empire continued until 1453 with its capital at Constantinople (modern Istanbul).

The Roman Empire occupied first the Italian peninsula, then most of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. It influenced the whole of Western Europe throughout the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and beyond, in the fields of art and architecture, literature, law, and engineering, and through the continued use by scholars of its language, Latin.

Early Rome

The ancestors of the Romans were the Latins, a branch of the Indo-European peoples who migrated to the Italian peninsula from across the Alps around 1000 BC. The Latins established numerous hilltop settlements which gradually merged into larger city states as their civilization succeeded, and one of these was Rome, on the River Tiber. Rome's later dominance was helped by its geographical situation, within easy reach of the sea and the centre of the peninsula, and by its command of a ford over the Tiber which gave it control of a valuable salt route between the mouth of the river and the Apennine mountains, ensuring a steady income of money.

The earliest period of Rome is shrouded in legends, the most famous of which is the tradition that the city was founded by the twins Romulus and Remus about 753 BC. The Romans dated all events in reference to this, using the notation AUC (ab urbe condita, ‘from the [time of] foundation of the city’), much as AD is used in Western dating. The early kings of Rome were probably Etruscans. The Etruscans were a people who came to Italy from Anatolia (modern Turkey) around 900 BC. They lived in a region known as Etruria, which lay north of the Tiber.

The Roman people were divided into 30 curiae (clans is perhaps the nearest equivalent), and contained both patricians (aristocrats) and plebeians, or plebs (less privileged people). For military purposes the people were divided into centuriae, (theoretically groups of 100) on a property basis. All these people were grouped into tribes, of which there were 35 by the 3rd century BC.

The early kings of Rome were elected. They were advised by a senate composed of 100 patricians and a comitia, an assembly of the plebs. The senate survived, with many more members, into later
times. Rome grew rich and powerful under the Etruscan kings and became established as a civilized, locally powerful city-state. The last king of Rome was the despot Tarquinius Superbus (the Proud) who ruled from 534 to 510 BC. According to tradition, he was so disliked by the Romans that he was driven out and the monarchy abolished. A new aristocratic republican constitution was established, governed by two annually elected magistrates known as consuls.

The Republic from around 509 to 265 BC The young republic was engaged in a series of battles for dominance with its neighbours, the Etruscans, Samnites, Aequi, and Volsci. The Romans spent much of the 5th century BC fighting off the Aequi and Volsci, with the aid of a series of alliances with neighbouring Latin tribes, known as the Latin League. In the later part of the century they went on the attack, and absorbed both tribes. By 406 BC the expansion of Roman influence brought them into conflict with Etruria, sparking a fresh war with the Etruscans. The Romans won with the capture of Veii, the chief Etruscan city, in 396 BC and took possession of the whole of southern Etruria.

Much of the Romans’ success in this area was due to the northern Etruscans’ preoccupation with the Gauls, a barbarian tribe who were invading from the Alps. In 390 these tribes entered Roman territory, defeated the Roman army on the banks of the River Allia – a tributary of the Tiber – and sacked the city. The Gauls withdrew after a fruitless siege of the Capitol, a citadel on top of one of Rome’s seven hills. The Romans never forgot this disaster (dies Alliensis), which was a severe blow to their prestige, although it did little harm to the city’s internal structure or power. However, it sparked a series of uprisings by allied barbarian tribes which Rome successfully put down, absorbing new territories as a result.

The 4th century BC saw Rome expand throughout most of Italy, with those areas not directly conquered coming under Roman control by a complex series of alliances and colonizations. Many of Rome’s allies in the Latin League resented Rome’s dominance and rebelled; this led to the Latin Wars of 340 to 338 BC, which Rome won, bringing the Latin states under Roman control. Rome also had three clashes with the Samnites, a group of tribes living on the plain near Rome. The Samnite Wars raged 343–341, 326–304, and 298–290 BC. Despite suffering a humiliating defeat at the Caudine Forks in 321 BC, Rome eventually crushed the Samnites. After further clashes with the Greek cities of southeast Italy, aided by Pyrrhus of Epirus, the Romans absorbed much of this area as well and by 270 BC controlled or directly ruled most of Italy except Cisalpine Gaul, a region of northern Italy between the Apennines and the Alps, which was occupied by Gauls.

Rome’s triumph had been achieved not only by force of arms, but also by a policy of colonization and building roads. This helped to absorb newly conquered territories. Most of the people in the Italian peninsula now enjoyed Roman citizenship, and those who did not were bound to Rome by alliances of various grades. While direct taxation fell exclusively upon Roman citizens, all citizens and allies were bound to do military service. Most important, a common culture and language (Latin) replaced local religions, customs, and dialects.

The Punic Wars Rome became the leading power in Italy almost by accident, by responding first to one threat and then to another, until eventually there were no more threats. To some extent the same is true of the way in which the Romans expanded outside mainland Italy to become the leading power in the Mediterranean. The expansion began in a series of wars against Carthage, a colonial city established in what is now Tunisia by the Phoenicians of the eastern Mediterranean. The wars are known as Punic, from the Latin name for Carthage, ‘Punicus’. The First Punic War (264–241 BC) was caused by Rome’s
concern for the protection of its allies in southern Italy against a Carthaginian army, and ended with the gaining of its first overseas province, Sicily, from Carthage in 241 BC. This was quickly followed by the acquisition of Corsica and Sardinia in 238 BC as Rome took advantage of Carthage's weakness to expand.

The Second Punic War (218–201 BC) was potentially far more serious. The Carthaginian general Hannibal invaded northern Italy and defeated the Romans in a number of battles. He then spent 15 years on Italian soil. Although he remained undefeated by Rome, Roman victories elsewhere, particularly victories in Spain in 206 BC and an attack on Carthage itself, meant that Hannibal had to leave Italy. Rome claimed its final victory over Carthage at the battle of Zama in 202 BC, and Carthage ceased to be an important military power in the Mediterranean. The Romans did not destroy Carthage, however, and it regained much of its previous commercial wealth and power. This annoyed many Romans, who felt that Carthage could become a threat again, and so Rome engineered the Third Punic War (149 BC). The Carthaginians were ready to surrender and accept Roman terms until it was revealed that one of these terms was the destruction of their city. They held out until 146 BC, when the Romans finally destroyed the city and turned the area into a Roman provincia.

Roman armies were also active to the north and east of Italy during the same period. In the north, wars with the Gaels and the barbarians living in the area occupied by modern Austria and the countries along the Adriatic coast led to the acquisition of Cisalpine Gaul, and the extension of Roman control along the Mediterranean coast to Marseille in the west, and down the Dalmatian coast (now part of Croatia) in the east.

Macedonian wars Rome was drawn into several wars in the east, and took control of much of Greece in the Macedonian Wars. Macedonia was then a country which covered much of northern Greece. The first Macedonian War (214–205 BC) was against the Macedonian king Philip V, an ally of Hannibal, and ended somewhat inconclusively. Philip V also sparked the second war (200–196 BC) and this time was defeated, leading the Roman consul and general Titus Quinctus Flaminius to announce at the Isthmian games (a regular Greek event similar to the Olympic games) that Greece was free from Macedonian domination. After the third Macedonian war against Philip V's successor, Perseus (172–168 BC), Macedonia was broken up. When attempts were later made to reunite the kingdom, Macedonia was made a Roman province in 146 BC. In the same year the Achaean League of Greek cities attempted to assert its independence. Rome made Achaea a province. Those cities in Greece which had proved friendly became nominal allies, and those which had resisted were made subjects.

146–31 BC The empire continued to expand. In France the Gallic Wars 58–51 BC extended Roman control throughout Transalpine Gaul, from the Rhine to the Pyrenees and from the Alps to the Atlantic. The senate had emerged from the war against Hannibal in as strong a position internally as Rome was in the world at large. However, there were two major problems in its administration of the empire. The patrician (aristocratic) class which formed the senate also held appointments as Roman governors and generals, giving its members great power and access to huge opportunities for wealth. It therefore became common, and even normal, for a governor and his staff to regard provincial administration as a quick way of making a fortune. The governors were protected by their allies in the senate, so their corruption and the poor administration of the empire went unchallenged. The senate also failed to work out any system for having a standing army loyal to the state. Many generals and governors became more concerned with their own power and position that of the empire, and were able to tie their armies' loyalty more closely to them personally than to Rome. When they disagreed with the Roman
government, or each other, they had a ready-made following, which led to the possibility of internal armed conflict or civil war. At the same time, the authority of the senate came under attack from political agitators, who used the limited power allowed the people under the Roman constitution to try and displace the senate as the ruling body of Rome.

During 100 years of disorder, the Republic gradually broke down and came to depend on the protection of the powerful men who were threatening its existence. After a bitter struggle with the senate, the general Julius Caesar finally shattered the Republic after a brief civil war (49–46 BC). His murder in 44 BC sparked off a period of further civil war between his heirs, Octavian (his adopted son) and Mark Antony (his political heir), and the men who had killed him. After an uneasy period of power-sharing, Octavian and Mark Antony also fell out, leading to renewed civil war (32–30 BC). Mark Antony had become involved with Cleopatra, the Egyptian queen who ruled jointly with her son Ptolemy XV. Octavian presented himself as the true protector of Roman interests against the influences of the East, and emerged supreme to effectively become the emperor.

**The Empire – Augustus to Marcus Aurelius** Octavian used the existing political organization and processes to cover up his personal power, and give the impression that his government was still working with the senators and the people. He used his power as emperor to bring peace back to the Mediterranean for the first time in over a hundred years, increasing his grip over Rome. He was granted the title Augustus in recognition of his achievement in bringing peace to Rome, although this had been at the cost of abolishing the Republic. He also stabilized the empire, which by now stretched from the Middle East to Gaul, and after a series of disasters in Germany ordered that it should not be expanded further. His successors, the family known as the Julio-Claudians, ruled until Nero was deposed in AD 68. Civil war broke out again, but after the chaos of the year of the four emperors, AD 69 (when four successive generals briefly seized the throne, each to be deposed by the next), order was restored by Vespasian, who established the Flavian dynasty. After the assassination of the last of the Flavians, Domitian, in AD 96, the senate elected Nerva as emperor.

Then followed a period of 83 years when, as chance would have it, none of the emperors had a direct male heir and so each adopted as his heir the man he considered the most suitable to rule. As a result Rome and the Mediterranean world enjoyed nearly a century of uninterrupted good government under Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius. The system broke down when Marcus Aurelius took the disastrous step of appointing his incompetent son Commodus to succeed him in AD 180.

The Roman Empire reached its largest extent in this period. Dacia and Parthia were conquered under emperor Trajan, and the might of the empire was felt throughout Europe and Mediterranean. However, behind the appearance of power and prosperity in the 2nd century AD, the causes of the future collapse of the empire were building up. First, there was the problem of the army: Augustus had gone some way towards solving the problems of the Republican era by creating a permanent army of about 300,000 troops, which was paid by the emperor, and therefore in theory was loyal to him. However, the armies had to be placed on the frontiers of the empire to guard against its most dangerous enemies, so the troops and their generals were far from Rome for long periods of time. Loyalty to the local commander became more important than to the emperor in Rome, a fact dramatically demonstrated in 69 AD, the 'year of the four emperors'. The army's absence from Rome also gave more political influence to the troops stationed in Italy, especially the Praetorian Guard (the imperial bodyguard).

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The second problem was financial. The vast cost of the armies, and the feeding and entertainment of Rome’s urban population, were a great drain on the government’s money. The empire could meet these demands under normal circumstances, but any unusual increase expenditure (such as an irresponsible emperor, or an expensive foreign war) created problems. To make up for their lack of money, the emperors used desperate measures. The system of liturgies (taxes for the state) was revised and abused. Voluntary contributions by wealthy citizens were replaced by compulsory contributions. In the 3rd century the compulsory taxes and levies were increased dramatically, eventually destroying much of the wealth of the empire, and making the emperor’s difficulties even worse. When the great wave of barbarian attacks came in the 3rd century, the empire had no resources in reserve with which to meet them.

**Marcus Aurelius to Diocletian** During the reign of Marcus Aurelius (AD 161–80) the weakness of the frontiers first became apparent. The legions were largely made up of soldiers recruited from conquered peoples who, with no natural loyalty to Rome, were a danger to its authority, even though care was taken to post them to places far removed from their homelands. A succession of soldier-emperors was placed on the throne by their respective armies, and despite periods of intermittent stability much of this time is characterized by internal military upheavals. Two of the soldier-emperors, however, Claudius II, an Illyrian, and Aurelian, from Pannonia, managed to stem the tide of invasion and for a time to restore the pride of the collapsing empire.

**Diocletian to Romulus Augustulus** Diocletian (284–305) declared himself an absolute monarch, assuming the title of ‘Domus’, and abandoning any pretence of working with the senate. However, he instituted a series of reforms, both economic and political. They helped to stabilize Rome’s internal affairs, and a period of peace and prosperity ensued. He also began the process of splitting the imperial command. While he kept overall command, he took as his special province Asia and Egypt and co-opted a fellow ‘Augustus’, Maximian, who took Italy and Africa. Two subordinate sovereigns were also adopted, with the title of Caesar, Galerius in Thrace and Illyria, and Constantius Chlorus (Constantius I) in Gaul and Spain.

The system worked well as a sensible administrative reform while Diocletian remained in control, but on his abdication in AD 305 fierce struggles inevitably broke out among the subordinate ‘mini-emperors’. There was intermittent civil war until Constantine (I) the Great emerged as the only emperor.

Constantine began the process of the acceptance of Christianity across the empire with his decree of toleration, the Edict of Milan in AD 313, and summoned the first of a long series of general councils of the church at Nicaea in AD 325. These councils had enormous power in the political as well as the theological sphere for the next millennium. Even more significantly for Rome, he divided the empire into East and West by founding his new capital, Constantinople, at Byzantium (now Istanbul), with a new senate and a new nobility. This Eastern Empire was Greek in culture; it developed into the Byzantine Empire, which endured through many changes of circumstances but constant splendour until 1453.

On the death of Constantine in AD 337 rival rulers fought for power, while barbarian tribes swept across the frontiers of the West. In AD 364 Valens was appointed Eastern (Byzantine) emperor by his brother, Valentinian I, ruler of the Western Empire. For a time he succeeded in holding the Goths, a barbarian tribe, at bay but was defeated in AD 378. Byzantium itself was now threatened, but through careful and clever diplomatic discussion with his enemies, the emperor Theodosius managed to save both his own dominions and the throne of his Western colleague Gratian. From the death of

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Theodosius in AD 395 the remaining history of the Western Empire was chaotic; waves of Goths, Huns, and Vandals followed. Honorius (395–423), with the aid of his general Stilicho (a Vandal), defeated the Goths; but after Stilicho's death Alaric, the Visigoth king, having ravaged Macedonia and Illyria, captured and sacked the city of Rome in 410. Gaul and Italy were overrun by the Huns, while the Vandals conquered North Africa.

The Vandal king Gaiseric (or Genseric) again sacked Rome in 455 and finally the emperor Romulus Augustulus resigned his throne to Odoacer in 476. Odoacer reached an agreement with Zeno, the Eastern emperor, that there was no longer need for a division of the empire: Zeno should rule a united empire while Odoacer governed as patrician of Italy. This brought the Roman Empire to an end, although it was continued in the East by the Byzantine Empire.

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