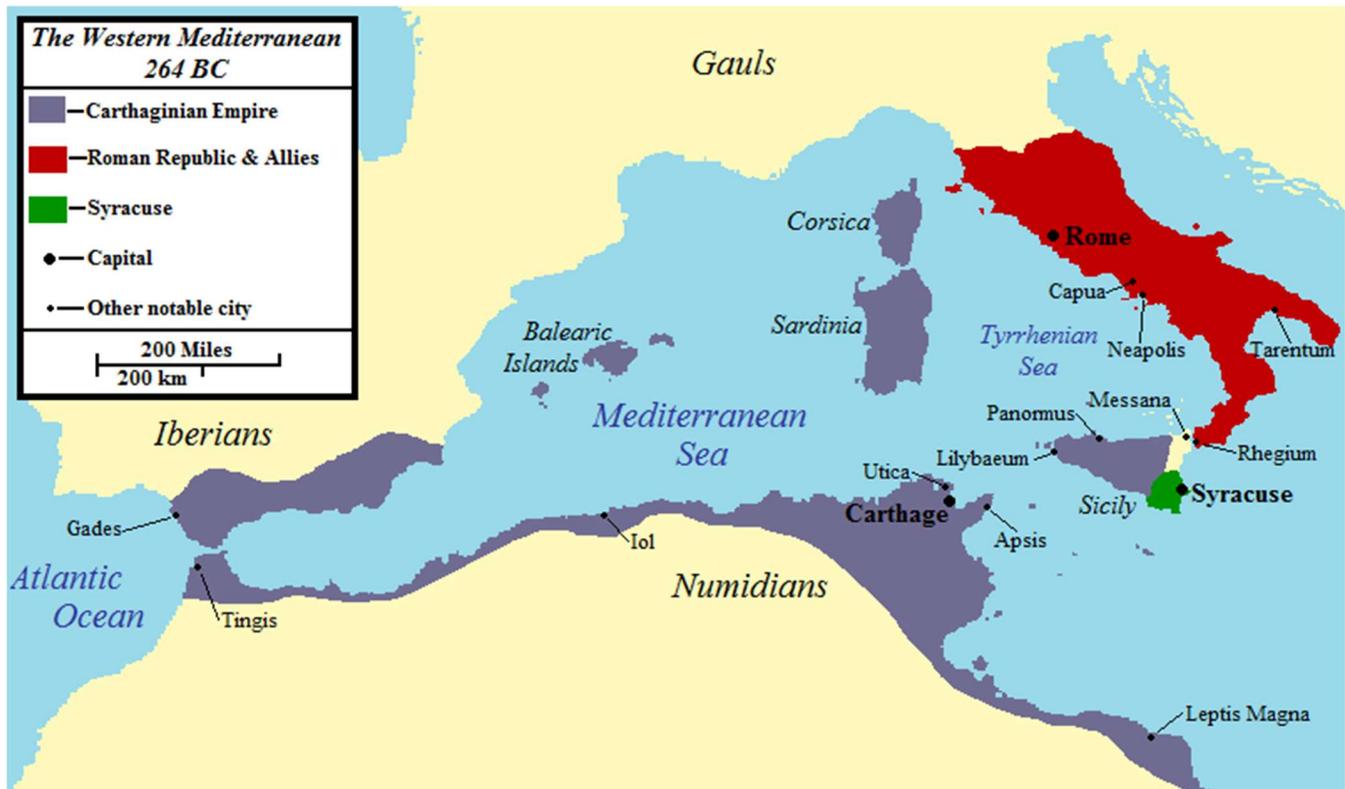


5.2 Birth of the Roman Empire

Growth and Collapse of the Roman Republic

As a Republic, the Romans took great pride in the various institutions that formed the basis of their society. As Rome expanded its territorial gains, it was even generous enough to extend many of the rights and privileges of citizenry to conquered peoples. The conquered were not treated as victims to be exploited, but rather partners in a mutually beneficial relationship. Rome demanded three things from the conquered: loyalty, recruits, and taxes. Nothing more. As its influence expanded across Italy the Romans had little trouble in maintaining this system of governance.



I. The Evolution of Rome

The biggest obstacle to Roman domination of the western Mediterranean Sea was Carthage. **Carthage** was a Phoenician colony established on a peninsula in North Africa. As a maritime trading power, Carthage controlled many of the islands of the Mediterranean such as Corsica and Sicily. Carthage had little incentive to fight the Romans, who themselves had no interest in the seas for some time. Eventually, Roman ambition drove it into conflict with the Carthaginians. The two powers fought in three wars which known as the Punic Wars. In the original Latin, Punic roughly translates to Phoenician.

The Punic Wars (264–146 BC)

The First Punic War lasted from 264–241 BC. In it, the Romans and Carthaginians fought for control of Sicily and the Western Mediterranean. It ended with the defeat of Carthage. The Second Punic War began in 218 BC and was largely a defensive war for Rome. A brilliant young Carthaginian general named **Hannibal** was Rome's greatest threat as he invaded Italy itself and handed Rome some of its worst losses in all of its history. His father had served the Carthaginians in the First Punic War, and Hannibal wanted to exact revenge for his father and his people.



Hannibal assembled an army of almost 60,000 infantry and cavalry that even included 60 war elephants. Hoping to catch the Romans by surprise, he did the unthinkable: he crossed the Alps, losing over half of his men and elephants in order to enter Italy from the north. While in Italy, Hannibal avoided direct combat with Rome knowing Rome's strength was to engage in direct combat. Instead, he raided the countryside and baited many Roman generals and consuls into losing battles and ambushes. Hannibal's greatest military triumph came in the **Battle at Cannae** of 216 BC. Under normal circumstances a victory like this would have been immediately followed up with an invasion of Rome directly, but Hannibal was forced to choose a more patient approach as he waited for reinforcements.

Hannibal understood the stubborn resolve of the Romans and without reinforcement conquering the city of Rome was next to impossible. Carthage delayed in sending reinforcements, and the few that were sent were intercepted by the Romans and defeated. As Hannibal waited for help, Rome mounted a bold invasion of Carthage led by **Scipio Africanus**, one of Rome's greatest generals. The Carthaginian elders who had long ignored Hannibal begged him to return home to defend the city. He reluctantly returned home, only to be forced to fight using a strategy devised by the city elders. In the **Battle at Zama** of 202 BC Hannibal was defeated. The Second Punic War ended only a year later in 201 BC.



The Third Punic War was less of a war and more of a Roman military operation to ensure that Carthage never challenged Rome's dominance again. One Senator in particular, Cato the Elder, famously ended every speech saying "... and I also think that Carthage must be destroyed!" Eventually, he and his supporters got their wish, and a third war was declared on Carthage. It lasted just three years, from 149–146 BC and ended with the total destruction of Carthage. After the days long burning of the city, all of its surviving inhabitants – some sources estimate around 50,000 – were sold into slavery. The destruction of Carthage was so thorough that few ruins can be found of the city today.

Opposites

It is important to note that the Punic Wars were probably the most important contest for power in Roman history. The Carthaginians were Rome's greatest competition and in many ways Rome's spiritual opposite. Being a Phoenician city, Carthage was focused on maritime trade. It had access to vast amounts of wealth, maintained the strongest navy in the Mediterranean, and commanded the largest trade network of the Mediterranean at the start of the wars.

Rome was primarily focused on agriculture and conquest, integrating conquered peoples into their Republic, and relying on taxes to maintain their growing empire. At the start of the wars, Rome had a fearsome military force, but it did not have anything close to a formal navy. In fact, it is well documented that the Romans did not even have the knowledge of how to build war ships. According to legend, Rome found a damaged Carthaginian warship washed ashore and studied it in order to construct their own fleet.

Carthage was also notorious for its reliance on **mercenaries**, private soldiers who fight for pay. The bulk of Carthage's military was made up of mercenaries and not citizen soldiers as Rome was. This was mostly because the Carthaginians were more concerned with their trade than in fighting their own battles. This made Carthage's army diverse and versatile compared to Rome whose rigid military strategy limited the creativity of its generals. Unfortunately, this also made the Carthaginian leaders callous towards their armies, who were considered expendable. Hannibal failed to conquer Rome largely because he was effectively abandoned in Italy with no hope for support. On the other hand, the Roman Republic was intensely devoted to its military and invested countless resources for victory. However, the military was also completely tangled with Roman politics. Hannibal was so successful against Rome because he took of advantage of the rigidity of Rome's legions and the political motives of Rome's military leaders.



Carthage was also known to pay for alliances in times of war, the most notable example being Macedonia. Around the time of the Punic Wars, Macedonia and the Greek city-states were struggling as the Hellenistic Kingdoms grew unstable. Rome was already posing a threat to their freedom so when Carthage came forward with a proposed alliance, the Greeks and Macedonians accepted quickly. As a result, while Rome fought Carthage it also fought against Macedonia and Greece in what are known as the Macedonian Wars. By the time Carthage was destroyed, Rome had also conquered Greece.



The end of Punic Wars not only set Rome apart as the dominant power of the Western Mediterranean, it also expanded the empire of Rome considerably as well. Once a simple kingdom fighting for survival in Italy, Rome was now the master of the Mediterranean. Italy, Iberia, North Africa, and the Hellenistic Kingdoms were all subjects to the Roman Republic. Domination of the Mediterranean took hundreds of thousands of Roman soldiers over the course of a century and yet Rome was initially unwilling to exert direct military control over these conquered peoples. The Romans expected the newly conquered to willingly submit as the various Italian kingdoms did for centuries before. The conquered did not submit.

II. A Fracturing Republic

The Roman Republic was forced to grapple with countless massive changes at once. New territories, an evolving military, and unprecedented economic growth allowed for a growth in Rome's power, but it also began a slow degradation of the systems that held the Republic together.

Shifts in Agriculture

As one might expect, the Greeks were especially unruly, defiant in the face of Roman authority. Within a few years, Rome was forced to personally manage the region. Across the new Roman empire, legions and governors were sent to maintain order. For the first time ever, the legions were asked to serve overseas for extended periods of time.

It is important to remember exactly who made up Rome's military. Contrary to what we might expect, Rome's legions were not made up of full-time professional soldiers. Roman soldiers were closer to a **militia**, an armed citizenry, made up of the land-owning citizens. Many of them were small farmers. Rome was, after all, an agricultural society. Most Roman residents owned at least a small plot of land, and in order to serve in the Roman military citizens were required to own a certain amount of property. Roman campaigns used to take place only in Italy whereas campaigns in distant lands were rare and short.

Following the Punic Wars, soldiers were needed to serve in garrisons hundreds of miles away from Italy. With the need to station legions in foreign lands, soldiers were forced to abandon their farms for extended period of time. At the end of their service, soldiers returned home only to find that their farms were in horrible condition. Many found that their land was illegally purchased by wealthier landowners – often patricians. Families struggled to manage land without the head of the household present, sometimes having no men at all to work the fields, and they often lost ownership of the land while the men were away. Land sales were often driven by desperation, but intimidation and deception also played a large role. Incredibly high casualty rates during the Punic and Macedonian wars also negatively impacted smaller landowners, as the wealthy snapped up the land of the families of the deceased.

The spoils of war benefitted the wealthiest Romans who used their new riches to buy up land for themselves. Over time, the small self-sufficient farms that dotted the Italian Peninsula were replaced by large estates, or **latifundia**. The owners of these estates chose to use the land for profits. Wheat, the staple of ancient Italian agriculture, was replaced with the production of wine and the creation of fields for grazing. As a result, most Italian communities – especially cities – grew to rely on imported grain.

The expansion of the Roman Republic also gave Rome a massive supply of slave labor. The city of Carthage alone supplied Rome with around 50,000 slaves when it was destroyed. Slaves provided cheap labor for the latifundias that were growing throughout Italy. Slavery was also hereditary, and slaves were considered the property of their masters. They could be bought, sold, beaten, killed, or freed at their master's will. In Rome however, the wealthier the master the better conditions a slave enjoyed.

Growth of the Proletariat

Without land and unable to compete with free slave labor, many Roman veterans were forced to move their families to cities to find work. They found none. Thousands of men and their families flowed into Italian cities, especially Rome. Unable to find work they lived in extreme poverty in the slums of the ancient cities. These veterans and their families radically expanded the Roman **proletariat**. The modern term *proletariat* comes from the Latin word *proletarius* which means, "the one who produces offspring," as the only use a member of the proletariat had for the state was in raising children. With no work and massive food shortages, the proletariat did little more than riot from time to time.



The suffering of Rome's veterans did not go unnoticed. Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus (bottom of page 5), known as the **Gracchi Brothers**, tried to fight for the proletariat, specifically military veterans, who suffered even after honorably serving the Republic. The Roman historian Plutarch records a speech by Tiberius:

"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."

The words of Tiberius were followed by action. He was elected as a tribune in 133 BC and he attempted to establish small farms to employ the poor and provide them with food. He also advocated for the forced sale of illegally purchased land in order to establish these farms. The Roman public supported Tiberius' proposals, but the patricians – and therefore the Senate – were strongly opposed. Threatened by Tiberius' popularity and ideas, the patricians had him assassinated the same year he was elected. A few years later, Gaius Gracchus tried to continue his brothers work by building on his policies and selling food at an extremely low price to the poor. He too became tribune but in 121 BC Gaius was also killed, by a mob stirred up by his rivals.

The violent deaths of the Gracchi Brothers were the first time that Rome saw violence against government officials being used as a political tool. It set a dangerous standard that would soon spiral out of control.

Civil War

Decades after the Punic Wars new problems arose in the Republic. The growth of the proletariat had adverse effects on the Roman military. Military service was reserved only for those Roman citizens who owned a certain amount of land, and with increasingly more small landowners losing their property the number of citizens eligible for service shrank. The Republic tried to reduce the property requirement with little success until a general named **Gaius Marius** instituted military reforms in 107 BC that would irreversibly alter the nature of the Roman military as well as Roman politics.

Marius' reforms, known as the Marian Reforms, helped the Roman military evolve into a proper imperial power. Prior to these reforms, the Roman legions operated more like a militia than a standing army. The Marian Reforms changed army logistics, modernized military strategy, and completely overhauled wages and requirements for service. Property was no longer required in order to serve in the army and the government would now be responsible for equipment rather than requiring citizens to provide their own. The Marian Reforms introduced the equipment that we see in images of Roman legions (below).

The Marian Reforms made it possible for thousands of Romans to serve in the military, but wages were now to be paid by the Roman generals. To encourage Gaius Marius went a step further and promised each soldier a land grant after 16 years of service. This made his legions Rome's first professional full-time soldiers. As a result, legions were no longer loyal to the Republic but to their generals, who paid their wages and promised them a comfortable life after their service.



While the Marian Reforms turned the Roman army into the most efficient military machine of the ancient world, it also started to tear the Roman Republic apart. With such a close relationship between the military and politics, generals seeking political power now had loyal and extremely strong followers in their legions. The deaths of the Gracchi brothers combined with the Marian Reforms gave politicians a new standard for securing power: using military force. Understanding this new reality, Gaius Marius used his legions as a political tool and was elected consul not once, but six consecutive times. Such a feat was illegal according to Roman law, but if murder was acceptable for the Senate then the bigger army wins.

Marius would not rule uncontested. One of his former aides, **Lucius Cornelius Sulla**, rose to oppose Marius' rule and sparked a civil war that ended in 82 BC with Sulla taking control of Rome. In 81 BC Sulla revived the old dictatorship by declaring himself dictator. Once in power, he went about reforming the Republic. His primary goal was to give power back to the Senate and to weaken the Tribunes to the point of obscurity. Satisfied with his work, Sulla went on to retire to his estate and died peacefully a few years later. The reforms of Marius and Sulla permanently damaged the republic and their actions inspired a new struggle for power in which one man would truly seize full control of Rome.

Side Stories: Spartacus

As the republic struggled to find political stability, riots and slave uprisings were a fairly common occurrence across the Roman territories. The story of the runaway slave **Spartacus** (left) is one of many examples of Roman slaves rising up for their freedom. Though no slave revolt was ever successful, Spartacus' unique leadership and strategy almost led to the freedom of 120,000 slaves. Disagreements within the chaotic slave army forced them south and they were eventually defeated by a rising general named Marcus Licinius Crassus who will become even more relevant to us soon.

III. Fall of the Republic (60–27 BC)

The stage was set for the fall of the Roman Republic. The legions, now more efficient than ever, were a political tool. New standards were set with Marius' illegal six years of consulship and Sulla's resurrection and seizure of the office of dictator. Additionally, the very core of the Republic was shaken with Sulla's reforms. It was only a matter of time before someone would concentrate the full powers of the government in themselves. Civil wars plagued Rome since Marius and Sulla fought, but one civil war spelled the end of the republic.

The Triumvirate

Thanks in part to the structure of the Roman Republic and in spite of the changes made by Marius and Sulla, no single man was ever able to take power on their own. Instead, political groups were formed and competed for power. Many groups fought for control, but one informal political alliance distinguished itself as soon as it was formed. Known as the **First Triumvirate**, three men allied together to seize control of Rome in 60 BC. The "richest man in Rome," Marcus Licinius Crassus, the general **Pompey the Great**, and a noble named Gaius Julius Caesar.



With the support of the popular general Pompey and funding by Crassus, **Julius Caesar** was elected consul in 59 BC. As consul, Caesar broke the law countless times, usually by overriding his co-consul's vetoes and using the legions to intimidate the Senate into supporting his policies. When his term ended, Caesar knew that he would have to answer to the law for his crimes. To avoid this, Caesar looked for immunity and found it when he appointed himself governor of Gaul. Naturally, he relied on Pompey and Crassus in order to take this position.

As governor of Gaul, Caesar was also given command of four Roman legions and so he made plans to expand his dominion. From 58 to 50 BC, Caesar led a successful but brutal campaign to take control of all of Gaul. Meanwhile Crassus and Pompey were on campaign to expand the empire and secure the support of the Roman people as they did. Pompey was able to conquer Syria and Judea. Crassus tried to expand deep into the Parthian Empire in Mesopotamia, who were descendants of the ancient Persians, but died while on campaign.



Julius Caesar

Following the death of Crassus and having conducted a successful campaign to conquer two coveted regions, Pompey secured the office of consul in 52 BC. As Caesar completed his own conquest of Gaul, Pompey began to fear that his ally would soon overpower him. As soon as Caesar ended his campaign, Pompey ordered Caesar to return to Rome. In Rome, it was traditional for generals to disband their legions after a successful campaign so that the general could be welcomed back to Rome with a **Triumph** (below), a parade to celebrate victorious generals. Triumphs were considered the greatest honor a Roman could receive, but Pompey was not planning on honoring Caesar at all.

Knowing all of the crimes Caesar committed as consul almost a decade ago, Pompey had the perfect excuse to imprison Caesar and effectively eliminate the greatest threat to his dominance of Rome. When he heard of Pompey's plan to betray him, Caesar is believed to have said, "the die is cast." Caesar returned to Rome as ordered but did not travel alone; he went with one of his legions. This was an act of **treason** and it sparked another civil war in the republic. By the end of it, the Roman Republic collapsed.



Aware of Caesar's treason, Pompey fled Rome and surrendered control of the Republic in 49 BC. For the next three years, Caesar fought and defeated Pompey's armies in Greece, Asia, Iberia, and even Egypt which was still being ruled by the Ptolemaic kings. In Egypt, Caesar was presented with the head of Pompey, who was assassinated a few days before. This "gift" disgusted Caesar, who would have preferred to imprison Pompey or at the very least give him a proper burial. Caesar returned to Rome in 46 BC and was appointed dictator by the Senate that same year. He went on to destroy any remaining opposition and was elected consul for the third and fourth time as he did. In 45 BC, Caesar ruled as sole consul. Just one year later, he was named dictator for life.

Caesar took advantage of the powers of the dictatorship and ruled like a true autocrat. Even still, he made sure to reform Rome in healthy ways – not as Sulla did before him. Caesar granted citizenship to many people across Rome's territories and expanded the Senate by adding his friends and supporters. He created jobs for the proletariat through the construction of government buildings, and he established colonies for other proletariats – especially his legions – to own land. Caesar even increased wages for his soldiers.



Although Caesar dismantled the power of the government, Rome was still a republic if only by name. In the eyes of the public, Caesar was just a powerful public figure ruling within the limits of Roman law. In spite of Caesar's growing popularity (or perhaps because of it) many patricians and senators grew fearful of Caesar's motives. They began to fear that Caesar was planning to declare himself king and that they would be powerless to stop him if he did. Their suspicions drove a group of senators led by Marcus Brutus and Gaius Cassius to coordinate his assassination. In 44 BC – on March 15 – Julius Caesar was stabbed 23 times on the Senate floor.

The Roman Principate (31 BC – 330 AD)

News of the assassination of Caesar was not taken well by the Roman people. Despite his exploitation of the republic, Caesar's leadership brought prosperity and a sense of stability to Rome. Civil war broke out immediately after his death and the remnants of the republic were shattered.

Three of Caesar's supporters turned all of Rome against Caesar's murderers and hunted them down. A few survivors escaped them, only to take their own lives. These three men, Lepidus, **Marc Antony**, and Caesar's 18-year-old grandnephew and adopted son, **Octavian**, formed the **Second Triumvirate** and took control of Rome in 43 BC. They ruled together for a decade before jealousy turned them into bitter rivals.

In 36 BC, Lepidus tried to take control of Sicily using legal means but made the mistake of using his massive army to intimidate Octavian. Rather than engage in battle, Octavian took advantage of his rival's misstep and only had to accuse Lepidus of treason. Understanding the situation, they were in, all of Lepidus' 14 legions defected and joined Octavian. Humiliated and powerless, Lepidus had no choice but to submit to Octavian and he was stripped most of his titles (he only kept a ceremonial title that was given to him by Caesar). Lepidus was forced into exile shortly after.

Years earlier, Marc Antony left Rome and remained East to avoid Octavian. While in Anatolia, he met Cleopatra, now pharaoh of Egypt, and he fell in love. The two lovers travelled to Egypt, which was still not a Roman province. Once again, Octavian took advantage of a rival's mistake and accused Marc Antony of attempting to rule Rome from Egypt. Civil war broke out and Octavian defeated the combined armies of Marc Antony and Cleopatra in 31 BC. The lovers fled and committed suicide together later that year. Octavian took full control of Rome and Egypt.

The circumstances of his rise to power were justifiable in the eyes of even the patricians. They witnessed what could happen if a popular leader were unceremoniously murdered on the floor of the Senate. Octavian knew this, but he did not take his good fortune for granted. As soon as he eliminated both of his rivals, Octavian (left) began the long and difficult process of reforming the shattered Roman system of government. He made sure to resurrect and maintain many of the key aspects of the old Roman Republic – such as titles, offices, and the Senate – but he concentrated almost all power in himself. Even though he operated as a military dictator, he never acted like one publicly. Rather than taking the title of king or emperor, he claimed the humble title of **princeps**, ("first among equals"). It is for this reason that the period following the Roman Republic is called the **Roman Principate**. The Principate was the first phase of the Roman Empire.

Octavian had many additional titles, such as Caesar, an honorific title that solidified his relation to Julius Caesar and would later become synonymous with emperor. His most famous title was **Augustus** which means "exalted and venerable" and was given to him by the Roman Senate. Today, most know Octavian simply as Caesar Augustus.



Side Stories: Cleopatra

It is easy to simplify Cleopatra as a woman who used her sexuality to get her way. The truth, however, is not that clear. Reducing one of the most powerful women of the ancient world in this way is a huge disservice to the study of history.

Cleopatra did have an intimate relationship with two Roman generals, Julius Caesar, and Marc Antony, but she did much more than just skoodilypoop with powerful men. Cleopatra stabilized the oldest civilization on the planet, and she was one of the most educated and competent rulers in her entire family line – the Ptolemies. Unfortunately, Cleopatra was the final pharaoh of Egypt and the only surviving writing we have about her was written by her enemies in Rome.