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A SUMMARY OF ROMAN HISTORY

Chapter Summary

The events discussed in this chapter cover more than a millennium, and their effects continued, in one form or another, for much longer. Interest in ancient Rome has continued from the medieval period until today, as has the civilization's influence on many social, economic, and political aspects. This brief historical prelude is not meant to be exhaustive but to present a sketch of the chronology of Roman history relevant to the following thematic chapters.

Starting with the foundation by Romulus, the first king, in 753 BCE, the chapter then deals with the end of the Monarchy, the Republic, and Imperial phases until the age of Constantine, the first Christian emperor, who also reunified the empire under one emperor after the division in eastern and western halves established by Diocletian soon after his accession in 284 CE.

Modern scholars have divided the Republican period in Early, Middle, and Late. The dates associated with these phases are frequently disputed. In this chapter, for example, the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Augustan Era is given as 31 BCE, but other historians may prefer 27 BCE. The period from Augustus until the end of the third century CE is frequently referred to as the Principate. (p. 41).

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, students should be able to:

- demonstrate a familiarity with the events and concepts important for understanding Roman history, particularly of the period from 200 BCE to 200 CE;
- have a firm grasp of the distinguishing characteristics of each phase of Roman history, especially early Rome, the Republic (early, middle and late) and Principate (Augustus, Julio-Claudians, Flavians, Antonines, and Severans);

- describe and discuss Roman politics, including the effects upon Roman culture, and the major participants in historical events (e.g. Julius Caesar and Augustus); and
- show a knowledge of the literary sources that relate to Roman history, specifically those of Tacitus, Livy, and Dionysius of Halicarnassus.

Suggestions for Discussion

Instructors should draw attention to the historical development of Rome from its earliest beginnings in the eighth century BCE to the fall of the Western Empire in the fifth century CE, highlighting important events and people from each period. It is important for students to contextualize specific socio-cultural developments within their proper historical framework and to recognize that key political and/or military events impacted the structure of life and culture in ancient Rome. Questions to consider include the following:

1. How do primary sources (e.g. Tacitus, Livy, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, etc.) shape our understanding of specific Roman historical events and/or people?
2. How did Rome's wars of conquest affect politics in the Republic?
3. Why did political tensions increase as a result of Rome's victory over Carthage?
4. How did the Roman emperors shape and transform late imperial history?

Sample Essay/Exam Questions and Answers

1. **Trace the evolution of the Roman constitution from Monarchy to Republic to Empire. What characteristics are key to each period? How do these characteristics change or stay the same over time and why? Be sure to discuss important events and/or people for each period. You may also want to discuss the primary sources available for the study of each period and its impact on our understanding of the Roman constitution.**

Monarchy: As far as the Romans were concerned, the city of Rome sprang into existence in the middle of the eighth century BCE. Roman chronology would begin from this date: 753 BCE for us; 1 AUC (year one *ab urbe condita*, or “from the foundation of the city”) for the Romans. Rome was named after its legendary founder and first king, Romulus, a descendant of the Trojan hero Aeneas, who had escaped from the ruins of Troy to settle in Italy. A non-hereditary kingship remained the rule for the next two and a half centuries, during which six other kings are said to have held power in succession. (p. 25)

Republic: The Republic's system of government did not distribute the powers of the king among all citizens. Instead, it was divided between two magistrates, the consuls, who were elected annually by the voting assemblies of adult male citizens and who had the senate as their advisory board. During this time, the other major Roman magistracies—praetor, quaestor, *aedile*, tribune, and censor—were also established. The republican system is often regarded as a

combination of monarchic, aristocratic, and democratic elements represented respectively by the consuls, senate (and elected magistrates), and popular voting assemblies.

The history of the late Republic can be depicted as a drawn-out struggle between members of the senatorial order who sought to ensure its leadership of the state (the *optimates*) and other ambitious men (the *populares*)—for the most part also members of the senatorial establishment—who sought to circumvent the traditions of the senate by drawing power from the support of the people and loyal soldiers. (pp. 26-28)

Principate: One man, Octavian, was now in control. A century of revolution and the Republic were gone. The Principate had begun.

For centuries, the dominance of an individual (that is, the emperor) remained unchallenged in this new system. The senate continued to play a role in Roman politics, but its power was largely transferred to the emperor and his advisors. The voice of the Roman people—the plebs—could also still be heard and bring about change, but the ability to elect magistrates dwindled as selection increasingly became the prerogative of the emperor. Although emperors often veiled their powers and deeds behind republican rhetoric (and several claimed to be saviours or restorers of the Republic), the Republic would not return. (p. 31)

2. Evaluate the effects of Rome's military activity on the development of Roman politics during the Republic.

Unlike the early Republic, the middle Republic is characterized not so much by internal political tensions as by foreign war and expansion beyond the Italian peninsula. During the early Republic, Rome had begun to expand its influence in the peninsula, coming into conflict with (and ultimately emerging victorious over) the neighbouring Latin and Etruscan communities, as well as the Samnite peoples in southeastern Italy. By the late 270s BCE Rome was the undisputed power in the region. Different relationships were extended to defeated Italian communities.

Wars with Carthage, the great Punic city on the coast of North Africa, also loom large in this period. Rome's victory over Carthage at the end of the third century BCE allowed it to concentrate on its interests in the eastern Mediterranean. A series of Illyrian and Macedonian wars had broken out prior to and during the Second Punic War, and, with the Carthaginian threat suppressed, Rome's power on the Greek mainland steadily increased.

While Rome was enjoying unparalleled success in expansion and military endeavours, things were less prosperous in Italy. Although Rome's overseas achievements had enriched the political elite and increased its power at home, small Italian landholders were experiencing growing economic difficulties. Traditional explanations of the plight of Italian peasant farmers have recently been called into question. The late Republic is another period characterized by political problems at home.

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3. Compare and contrast the political careers of Julius Caesar and Augustus. How did each of these men come to power and what significant reforms did each institute? Be sure to discuss with specific reference to the First and Second Triumvirates.

Caesar: As consul in 59 BCE, Caesar began to implement measures conducive to his fellow triumvirs and managed to secure for himself a special, extended command of three legions to wage war in Gaul. However, triumviral relations deteriorated quickly in the 50s BCE. The politically provocative activities of plebeian tribunes Publius Clodius Pulcher and Titus Annius Milo served to antagonize the triumvirs against each other and led to violent clashes in Rome. In 52 BCE, in an attempt to quell the trouble, the senate appointed Pompey sole consul, and he quickly passed retroactive laws concerning corruption and gang violence, along with other laws to curb corruption and regularize the procedure for holding offices and commands (although, notably, exemptions were made for Caesar). By this point, however, the triumvirate had already dissolved, as Crassus had been killed during an unsuccessful invasion of Parthia the year before. Pompey soon decided to throw his lot in with the senate to work towards neutralizing Caesar, who had gained extraordinary military influence thanks to his activities in Gaul and who was seeking a second consulship. A series of political wranglings ended with the proposal that both Pompey and Caesar give up their respective commands and disarm; the proposal was vetoed by a small group of senators. One consul asked Pompey to save the Republic (from Caesar), and Pompey accepted.

The senate passed a *senatus consultum ultimum* on 7 January 49 BCE. Within days, Caesar had led his soldiers across the Rubicon River to invade Italy, initiating another civil war. In the years immediately following, and by a series of remarkable military campaigns, Caesar gained control of the Roman world. Pompey, defeated at Pharsalus in northern Greece (48 BCE), fled to Egypt, where he was killed as he disembarked from his ship. The remaining Pompeian forces, under the command of his sons, were defeated in 45 BCE at the Battle of Munda in Spain.

Throughout the civil war and until the end of his life, Caesar held an extraordinary array of offices (for example, dictator, consul, *pontifex maximus*) and exercised supreme power in Rome and Italy. Thanks to the support he enjoyed from the military, no one dared to resist as he implemented a variety of administrative reforms, increased the size of the senate (by making some of his supporters members), founded colonies (for both citizens and veterans), and instituted the Julian calendar. In his will, he adopted his great-nephew, Octavian (who would later become Augustus) as his son. Caesar was suspected of aspiring to be made king, to be deified, and to create a lasting Julian dynasty. (pp. 29–30)

Augustus: Caesar was stabbed to death on the Ides of March (15 March) 44 BCE by a throng of senatorial conspirators led by Marcus Junius Brutus and Gaius Cassius Longinus. Their hope that the removal of Caesar would lead to the restoration of the Republic under senatorial control was not realized. Anger rather than gratitude met the so-called tyrannicides, who were quickly ushered out of Rome. Conservative republicans' initial hope that Octavian might be manipulated to act in the interests of the senate and against Caesar's friend and commander, Marc Antony, were also disappointed. Although they were not natural friends, Octavian, Antony, and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus formed a coalition (referred to as the Second Triumvirate by modern historians) in 43 BCE. Unlike the First Triumvirate (the unofficial, private coalition among Julius Caesar, Pompey and Marcus Licinius Crassus established in 60 BCE), this alliance was formalized by statute and was officially known as the Triumvirs for the Restoration of the State (*Triumviri Rei Publicae Constituendae*); its purpose ostensibly was to pursue Caesar's assassins. Brutus and Cassius would die in 42 BCE after defeat at Philippi in Greece; other wealthy and leading men, including Marcus Tullius Cicero (the famous mid-first-century BCE orator and republican statesman who had denounced Antony in a series of speeches) were proscribed in Italy.

After the defeat of Brutus and Cassius, the triumvirate divided control of the empire, its resources, and its armies between its members. The chief beneficiary was Antony, who took the eastern area. Octavian was given the west (including Italy), and Lepidus received Africa. By the mid-30s BCE, however, Lepidus was marginalized, Octavian and Antony were estranged, and conflict between the two was inevitable. Defamation devolved into actual conflict, and in 31 BCE Octavian's forces defeated those of Antony and Cleopatra in the Battle of Actium, off the west coast of Greece. Antony and Cleopatra escaped to Egypt, where they soon committed suicide; Egypt and its wealth were added to Rome's empire. In reality, the massive forces barely came into conflict at Actium, but the battle still represented a defining moment in Roman political history. One man, Octavian, was now in control. A century of revolution and the Republic were gone. The Principate had begun.

Octavian, who took the name Augustus in 27 BCE, led the political shift from the combination of aristocratic and democratic systems in place during the Republic (represented by the senate and the Roman people, respectively, or *SPQR*, *Senatus Populusque Romanus*) to the autocracy of the Empire. By building on the successes of his predecessors, avoiding their mistakes, and utilizing all their weapons (legal or illegal, traditional or novel, moral or immoral), he gained absolute power and forged something new and lasting. Augustus was astute enough to cloak his powers with inoffensive vocabulary (he was the *princeps*, "leading man," and *primus inter pares*, "first among equals") and to create the impression that power and honours were shared almost equally between him and the senate. (pp. 30–31)

4. Discuss the reigns of the Antonine emperors. Why are these men traditionally considered "good"?

After Domitian's death, the senate recognized Marcus Cocceius Nerva as the new emperor. He faced the difficulty of making a clean break with Domitian's policy while preventing a revolt of the soldiers, with whom Domitian had been very popular. Nerva was willing to cooperate with the senators, who declared *damnatio memoriae* over Domitian. This process involved the removal of his image and name from all public monuments. During Nerva's reign, individuals whom Domitian had exiled were recalled to Rome and the *alimenta*, a state-sponsored support system to feed orphans, was initiated. To prevent a repetition of the Year of the Four Emperors, it was desirable that Nerva name an heir. In 97 CE he adopted as his son, co-ruler, and successor Marcus Ulpius Traianus (Trajan), a man in his mid-forties who was governor of Upper Germany, had a distinguished military career, and was popular with the soldiers. Nerva died the following year.

Trajan, who had been born in Spain, was the first Roman emperor not born in Italy. His adoption by Nerva began an unprecedented period of stability for the Roman Empire. Since four successive emperors (beginning with Nerva) had no sons, they kept a quasi-dynastic succession intact by adopting the individual(s) who would become their successor(s). This pattern lasted for 84 years (96–180 CE). The time of the reigns from Nerva to Marcus Aurelius is sometimes referred to, after Machiavelli, as the period of the five good emperors.

Under Trajan, the Roman empire saw its biggest territorial expansion and a subsequent period of consolidation, infrastructure development, and general prosperity. Presenting himself in deliberate contrast to Domitian, Trajan treated the senate with respect, a quality explicit in Pliny the Younger's *Panegyric*, an official speech in praise of the emperor. Trajan also expanded Nerva's *alimenta* and the distribution of free grain to the plebs in Rome. A series of surviving letters between Pliny the Younger and Trajan, written when the former was governor of the eastern province of Bithynia, is a valuable source of information about the even-handedness of

the Trajanic administration. The letters also give a glimpse into the nature of provincial administration in the early second century CE. Trajan died in 117 CE, after he had transferred his command over the Syrian armies to his successor and distant relative, Publius Aelius Hadrianus (Hadrian).

The exact details of Hadrian's succession are not quite clear, although Trajan's wife, Plotina, may have staged Hadrian's adoption shortly after her husband's death. Hadrian had been a member of Trajan's staff for some time and, as emperor, soon recognized that it was difficult to hold his predecessor's conquests, as the new provinces were by no means secure. Emperors were traditionally supposed to expand the empire gloriously, not forfeit parts of it, but Hadrian took the unpopular step of abandoning Armenia, Mesopotamia, and Assyria and withdrawing to the Euphrates. He may have had a more easily defensible boundary in mind, but there were also internal problems—notably the Bar Kokhba revolt in Judea in 135 CE—that likely led to a rethinking of the expansionist policy.

Hadrian rebuilt the Pantheon (originally constructed by Marcus Agrippa between 27 and 25 BCE), inaugurated the Temple of Venus and Roma in 121 CE (a temple he designed), and built his own mausoleum in Rome (now the Castel Sant'Angelo). However, he spent relatively little time in the city of Rome. He is known as the “restless emperor,” as the unstable situation on the frontiers required him to travel extensively. He inspected and fortified the *limes* (border area) in Germany and built Hadrian's Wall in Britain. Known as a philhellene, a lover of Greek culture, he also spent significant amounts of time in Greece.

In the mid-130s CE Hadrian fell ill and began to make provisions for his succession. After the death of his first adopted successor, Lucius Aelius Caesar, he adopted Aurelius Antoninus Pius, who, in turn, was required to adopt Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus. This arrangement ensured continuity of succession for two generations. Hadrian died in Baiae in 138 CE. During his reign, he secured the frontiers, brought about a rebirth of Hellenic culture in the Roman empire, and ensured a smooth transition to his successor.

Antoninus Pius continued Hadrian's external policy of consolidation, with the exception of one major engagement in the north of Britain, after which the Antonine Wall was built some 160 kilometres north of Hadrian's Wall. In contrast to Hadrian, though, Antoninus Pius never travelled outside of Italy while he was emperor. He tried systematically to prepare Marcus Aurelius for his role as future emperor so that, when he died in 161 CE, the Empire would have a capable new ruler. Indeed, at the beginning of Marcus Aurelius's reign, all seemed prosperous. The Mediterranean Sea was referred to as *mare nostrum*, “our sea,” and shipping routes—the arteries of the Roman economy—criss-crossed it. The empire was protected by an army that, since the reign of Hadrian, had focused mainly on defence, not expansion. At Dura-Europos, an important trading city in Syria, after its conquest, was built a frontier fortress. Concord marked the relationship between the emperor and the senate and that between Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus. In fact, Marcus Aurelius began his reign with a novelty: he elevated his adoptive brother to the rank of co-emperor—in theory his equal in every respect—as had been intended by Hadrian. The only formal difference was that Marcus Aurelius was also *pontifex maximus*. (pp. 35-37)

5. Discuss the Severan dynasty. What differentiates this dynasty from the previous ones?

The Severan dynasty lasted little bit more than forty years. It was characterized by strong and sometimes violent rivalry between family members. Lucius Septimius Severus, the first emperor of this dynasty, was also the first emperor of African origin. He was born in Lepcis Magna

(modern Libya) and was married to a Syrian woman, Julia Domna, who bore him two sons, Bassianus, also known as Caracalla, and Geta.

After the assassination of Commodus in December 192 CE and the turmoil that followed, Septimius Severus, proclaimed emperor by his troops in Upper Pannonia in 193 CE, was able to prevail on his rivals (Pescennius Niger and Clodius Albinus proclaimed emperors by their troops respectively in Syria and Britain) and founded the Severan dynasty. Associating his family with the Antonines and calling himself the “son of the deified Marcus Aurelius”, Septimius elevated his family. One of his first acts was the division of Syria and Britain in two provinces each. The decision was made to reduce the power of local governors. After defeating the Parthians in 199 CE, he created the new province of Mesopotamia. Ten years later he had to deal with the invasions of the Scots and the Picts in Britain. He was able to bring back under the Roman control the area south of the Hadrian’s wall, that had to be repaired. Other interventions he is remembered for are the fortification and the enhancement of the Hadrian’s limes system, the increase of the number of legions, and the strengthening of the role of the equestrians at the expense of the Senate.

In 198 CE, Septimius proclaimed Caracalla co-emperor and conferred the same honour to Geta in 209 CE. According to Cassius Dio’s account, Septimius Severus in his last words asked his sons to get along. This, however, did not happen and in 212 CE Caracalla had his brother killed, becoming the sole emperor. During his reign, Caracalla granted the Roman citizenship to all free inhabitants of the empire. The reasons for which this decree, known as *Constitutio Antoniniana*, was issued is still not clear, but it has been supposed that it increased the number of people liable to pay certain kind of taxes. Caracalla was murdered by one of his own bodyguards in 217 CE. The prefect of praetorian guard, Macrinus proclaimed himself as new emperor. His reign lasted only one year. In 218 CE, Caracalla’s cousin Elagabalus was proclaimed emperor. His reign lasted only four years and was remembered for several scandals. After his assassinations, his grandmother was an accomplice for, Severus Alessandrus, Elagabalus’ cousin, became the last emperor of this dynasty. He also was killed in 235 CE. (pp. 38-40).

Readings

- Boardman, J., J. Griffin, and O. Murray, eds. 2001. *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Roman World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This volume examines Rome from its origins as a cluster of villages to the foundation of the Roman Empire by Augustus and its consolidation in the first two centuries BCE. An envoi discusses aspects of the later Empire and its influence on Western civilization, including the adoption of Christianity.

- Boatwright, M., D. Gargola, and R. Talbert. 2004. *The Romans: From Village to Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Firmly grounded in ancient literary and material sources, this book traces Rome’s remarkable evolution from a village to an empire, describing and analyzing major political and military landmarks in Roman history.

- Hoyos D., ed. 2012. *A Companion to Roman Imperialism*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

This volume examines how Rome became an empire. Attention is paid to the changes of Rome's population and its power élite went through, while former subjects, in the eastern as well as the western part of the empire, themselves became Romans, widely contributing to Roman history and culture.

- **Mellor, R. 2012. *The Historians of Ancient Rome: An Anthology of the Major Writings*, 3rd edn. London and New York: Routledge.**

Mellor's comprehensive collection of ancient sources provides an introduction to Roman historical writing and extensive passages from more than a dozen Greek and Roman historians and biographers to trace Rome's history over more than a thousand years.

- **Schultz, Celia E., Allen M. Ward, F.M. Heichelheim, and C.A. Yeo, eds. 2009. *A History of the Roman People*. New York and London: Routledge.**

This work is a thorough analytical survey of Roman history from its prehistoric roots in Italy and the wider Mediterranean world to the dissolution of the Roman Empire.