CHAPTER 5 - THE ROMAN EMPIRE

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter deals with the prosperity, decline and fall of the Roman Empire. Topics include the Augustan settlement, imperial administration, foreign policy, literature, architecture and the rise and influence of Christianity, the crisis of the third century and the barbarian invasions of the fifth century.

Octavian was determined to avoid the fate of Julius Caesar. He gradually developed a system which left most of the real power to himself but pretended to be a restoration of the republic with Octavian as princeps (“first citizen”). The governmental system of the early Roman Empire is thus called the principate. The settlement of Augustus (as he was now called) was able to enlist the support of the upper classes. The Senate elected magistrates, made laws and exercised important judicial functions. These powers were, nevertheless, illusory in that the Senate merely assented to candidates or laws placed before it by the emperor. Opposition to imperial rule did exist especially under such emperors as Caligula, Nero and Domitian who failed to play the game well and did not respect the dignity or property of the senators. Under Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius, Vespasian, Titus and the five “good emperors,” however, the empire was run well and the Pax Romana (Roman Peace) was maintained throughout the empire.

Augustus had a genius for practical administration and was able to install rational government in the provinces for the first time. Imperial policy was a combination of the recognition of local differences with an attempt to unify the empire. Most of the provinces flourished economically in this period and accepted Roman rule easily.

Under Augustus, the army became truly professional; men enlisted for twenty years and played an important role in bringing Roman culture to the provinces. Augustus tried to find defensible borders to the north, but was only partially successful. For the most part, Augustus’ successors followed his defensive foreign policy. Trajan, however, expanded the imperial borders into the Balkans and Mesopotamia only to have his successor, Hadrian, retreat to Augustus’ policy of defensible borders.

Roman culture was at its height during this time. The chapter goes on to discuss the great literary figures of the late republic such as Cicero, Sallust, Caesar, Lucretius and Catullus. The patronage of Augustus played an important role in the manufacture of propaganda as well as great literature in the works of Livy, Horace and Vergil, whose epic poem, the Aeneid, portrayed Augustus as the second founder of Rome.

In the second century C.E., criticism and satire dominate the literary scene, particularly the writings of Seneca, Perseus, Lucan, Martial and Juvenal. Tacitus wrote a masterful history which borders on satire and Suetonius produced racy biographies of the emperors. Significant works also appeared in Greek.

Roman architects kept the basic construction techniques of the Greeks, but developed a semi-circular arch and concrete with which they were able to build structures of great size: the Colosseum, the baths and the Pantheon. Roman sculptors specialized in the reliefs found on columns. Special attention is paid in this chapter to primary accounts of the Roman baths, the gladiatorial shows at Rome and elections at Pompeii. A section on the apartment house highlights daily life in imperial Rome.

The first two centuries of the Roman Empire were indeed a “golden age,” but problems began to emerge at the end of this period. The cost of government kept rising as barbarian pressure increased and the size of the army and bureaucracy grew. There seems to have been a population decline. Taxes were raised higher and higher, and the emperors resorted to debasing the coinage which brought on inflation.

The growth of Christianity is also recounted. There is no reason to doubt that Jesus was an effective teacher in the prophetic tradition who taught that God would bring an end to the world as men knew it and would reward the righteous in heaven. Jesus was crucified as a dangerous revolutionary in Jerusalem in about 30 C.E. The new religion which grew up around the teachings of Jesus as reported by the apostles might have had a short life were it not for Paul of Tarsus, a Hellenized Jew, who was convinced that the new religion was not a version of Judaism and that converts did not have to adhere to Jewish law. Christianity in fact was for all mankind. Paul traveled throughout the Mediterranean, spreading the gospel. Another important factor in Christianity’s survival was its strong internal organization. Bishops led Christian communities and by keeping in touch with each other prevented doctrinal splintering.

For the most part, the Roman government did not take the initiative in attacking Christians in the first two centuries. Persecutions were generally started by mob action which was aroused by Christian denial of pagan gods. Division within the Christian church may have been a greater threat to its existence than persecution from outside. And yet, heresies compelled the church leaders to form a clear and firm orthodox canon which strengthened Catholic belief. After the destruction of Jerusalem in 135, Rome came to be the most important center of Christianity.

In the third century, the Roman Empire was simultaneously attacked on three fronts. In the east, the Sassanian dynasty succeeded to the Parthian empire, recovered Mesopotamia and threatened Roman provinces in the region. A Germanic tribe known as the Goths pressured the Danube frontier and overran the Balkan provinces. Other Germanic peoples, the Franks and the Alemanni, broke through further west.

The Roman army was not what it had been in its best days. As time passed, it was made up of an increasingly high percentage of barbarians. Soldiers were also used for non-military purposes and the line between soldier and civilian became less distinct. The fighting effectiveness of the Roman army was impaired as a result.
Society at large also suffered. Taxes rose while the shortage of manpower reduced agricultural production. Piracy and the neglect of roads and harbors hindered trade. The debasement of coinage encouraged an inflation which was soon far beyond control. The government had to demand payment in kind rather than accept its own worthless coins. The traditional ruling aristocracy was also changing and was eventually replaced by military men who had risen through the ranks. Septimius Severus, in fact, gave a privileged position before the law to hominiores (senators, equestrians, the municipal aristocracy and the soldiers) and the lower classes or humiliores found it almost impossible to move up to a higher social order.

The period from 235-285 was one of political chaos which saw twenty-six recognized rulers with only one dying a natural death. With a new defense strategy which included an emphasis on heavy cavalry and a mobile army as well as fortified cities, the Romans were able to check barbarian threats. The army, however, was now composed largely of mercenaries only technically Roman; the Romans hired barbarians to protect them from barbarians.

Reconstruction and reorganization took place under Diocletian (285-305) and Constantine (324-337). Diocletian introduced the tetrarchy, under which the empire was divided into parts and ruled by two senior Augusti and two junior Caesars who were to succeed the Augusti. This plan for better administration and smooth succession failed as a civil war erupted after Diocletian's retirement in 305. By 324, the empire was united again by Constantine who built the new capital of Constantinople on the site of ancient Byzantium. Under Diocletian and Constantine, the emperor changed from princeps (first citizen) to dominus (lord); hence the system of government was called the dominate. The emperor ruled by decree; the Senate had no role whatsoever. The economic reforms of Diocletian were unsuccessful and inflation was rampant although alleviated somewhat by Constantine. Stern regimentation was necessary to keep everyone in their occupations in order to assure stable production.

In the troubled times of the fourth and fifth centuries, people sought powerful deities who would bring them safety, prosperity and immortality. "Mystery" religions such as the cults of Isis, Cybele and Mithras became popular by the third century. Manichaeism, also popular, combined aspects of various religious traditions.

Christianity offered everything the mystery cults provided and more. By the third century it had taken hold in the east and in Italy. But the Christians were often blamed for the troubles of the empire and were persecuted by Decius in 250, again under Valerian and most seriously under Diocletian. Constantine supported Christianity vigorously and called the Council of Nicea in 325 to deal with the heresy called Arianism. This support assured the survival of Christianity even against a later attempt by the emperor Julian the Apostate (361-363) to return to the pagan cults. By 395, Christianity was the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Pagan scholars in this period copied the classical authors, wrote grammars and learned commentaries while Christian scholars such as Augustine, Jerome and Eusebius were productive in their accounts of the rise of Christianity and apologies against pagan attacks.

Renewed barbarian invasions in the fifth century put an end to effective imperial government in the west. Soil exhaustion, plague, climatic change and even lead poisoning have been suggested as reasons for Rome's decline in manpower. Slavery has been blamed for preventing scientific and technological advances. Some blame excessive governmental interference in the economic life of the empire, while others look to the destruction of the urban middle class.

We would do better to try to understand why the empire survived so long. Rome expanded to the limits of her ability to conquer and to govern. Without new conquests to provide the immense wealth needed for defense and maintenance of internal prosperity, the Romans yielded to unprecedented onslaughts by fierce and numerous attackers. When we contemplate the decline and fall of the Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries, we are only speaking of the west. A form of classical culture persisted in the east, centered in Constantinople. The Byzantine Empire would last until the fifteenth century.

**KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS**

1. **The Augustan Principate**: The Augustan settlement ostensibly restored the republic, but in fact established a monarchy. Augustus controlled twenty of the twenty-six legions in the provinces with the most potential for fighting. Egypt with its wealth and important grain production belonged to him alone. In fact, geographically the imperial provinces practically surrounded the senatorial. However, Augustus knew that he could not rule by force alone. He built around him a coalition of supporters who owed their positions to him. Augustus respected the dignity of the senators by using them in the administration and listening to their advice. This "sham of government," as it has been called, put a premium upon efficient and equitable treatment of its citizens. The strength of the system can be evaluated in its survival even through the reigns of incompetent and cruel emperors.
2. **Persecution of Christianity**: The Roman policy toward Christianity was ambivalent. After the localized persecution by Nero in Rome, there was only sporadic violence in the provinces, much of it provoked by Christians. The uncertain Roman policy is reflected in Trajan's correspondence with Pliny the Younger contained in the text. It is only later, in 250 C.E. that the emperor Decius launched a full-scale persecution. Much of the hatred of the Christians was due to their firm denial of pagan gods and in anti-Christian propaganda which portrayed them as guilty of cannibalism and incest.

3. **The Displacement of Rome as Capital of the Empire**: In accordance with Diocletian's reorganization of government, the empire was divided into four parts for better defense and administration. It is significant that Diocletian chose Nicomedia in the east as his center of administration. The advantages of an eastern capital were overwhelming: greater wealth, population, and tax base as well as freedom from the more intense barbarian activity of the west. Constantine formally moved the capital from Rome to Constantinople, a city which was set in a perfect geographic location for defense and control of the eastern trade. The Byzantine Empire, centered there, would last until the fifteenth century.

4. **Constantine and Christianity**: In his struggle to overcome his opponents in the civil war which followed the retirement of Diocletian, Constantine was said to have had a dream which convinced him that he owed his success to the Christian god; from then on he supported Christianity (calling and presiding over the Council of Nicea) without abolishing the imperial cult or pagan state religion. He was not baptized, in fact, until on his death bed. His devotion has therefore been questioned. Some have seen a utilitarian purpose in his support of Christianity - it enabled him to confiscate the gold and silver from some of the pagan temples in order to help reestablish the currency standard.

5. **The Success of Christianity**: Christianity had many philosophies and mystery religions to compete with beyond the pagan gods. Why was Christianity successful in the end? A few suggestions: A) Christianity was not exclusive, appealing to rich and poor, male and female, children and adults of whatever race. B) Christianity was a missionary religion which took advantage of Roman roads and the Roman peace. C) It espoused a philosophy of love and sacrifice told in parables which were easy to understand. D) It won over members of the intellectual upper class through apologies by Jerome, Tertullian and Augustine, as well as through doctrine defined by Clement, Origen and others. E) It existed early in the shadow of Judaism, a religion with special privileges under Roman law and thus was somewhat protected. F) It was persecuted which added to its appeal, since people were willing to die for beliefs that therefore must be valid. G) The threat and existence of heresies (Arianism) demanded a close evaluation and strengthened doctrine. H) It offered a life after death for true-believers. I) With the support of the emperor Constantine, its existence was assured. Many other cults offered some of these benefits, but the attraction of Christianity was formidable.

**SUGGESTED FILMS**


_The Glory That Remains: Old Soldiers Never Die_. Time-Life. 31 min.

_The Romans: Life, Laughter and Laws_. Lutheran Church in America. 22 min.

_Roman World_. International Film Bureau. 23 min.

_Splendor in the Sand. (Leptis Magna, ca. 300 C.E.)_. McGraw-Hill. 15 min.

_Pompeii - the Death of a City_. McGraw-Hill. 14 min.

_Pompeii - City of Painting (200 B.C.E. - 79 C.E.)_. Time-Life. 12 min.

_Pompeii - Once There Was a City_. Learnex Corporation of Florida. 25 min.

_Legacy of Rome_. American Broadcasting Co. 50 min.

_In Defense of Rome: Roman Law_. McGraw-Hill. 18 min.

_Christianity in World History—to 1000 C.E._. Coronet. 14 min.


Decline of the Roman Empire. Coronet. 14 min.