CHAPTER 5 - REPUBLICAN AND IMPERIAL ROME

CHAPTER SUMMARY

After describing Italy before the rise of Rome, the society of royal Rome, and the early republic and its constitution, this chapter tells the story of Rome's expansion: the conquest of Italy, the wars with Carthage, the increasing involvement with the Greek world, the eventual takeover of the Hellenistic east, the decline of the republic amid political factions and civil war, 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.

The culture of Italy developed later than those societies in the Near East. About 1000 B.C.E., Italy was overwhelmed by war-like invaders who cremated their dead, made iron tools and weapons, and spoke a number of related languages known as Italic.

Civilized Etruscans arrived in Tuscany (Etruria), perhaps from the east, about 800 B.C.E. and established themselves in a loose corporation of self-governing city-states. The Etruscans dominated the native Italians and accumulated considerable wealth. They expanded both to the north and south, but their conquests were not firmly based and were lost in the course of the fifth century B.C.E. Thereafter, Etruria lost its independence, but the Etruscan's influence on the Romans remained particularly in religion. The chapter goes on to describe Roman society and government under the kings (753-509 B.C.E.). In essence, Rome was ruled by a king whose powers were limited by his advisors, who composed the Senate, and an assembly of the people.

The center of Roman life was the family, in which the father had a position analogous to that of the king in the state. One of Rome's most important institutions was clientage; a client entrusted himself to the protection of a more powerful man (called a patron) in exchange for services which included military and political support.

A revolution in 509 B.C.E. replaced the monarchy with the republic. A thorough recounting of the Roman constitution and magistrates follows. Early Roman society had a class distinction based on birth: the patricians monopolized the positions of power and influence while the plebeians were barred from public office and from the priesthoods. Over the next two centuries they tried to achieve equality with the patricians. Their attempt was called the "struggle of the orders" and by 287 B.C.E., through legal means, the plebeians gained full access to the magistracies, as well as an important voice in the government. But still only a small group of leading families dominated the Senate and highest magistracies.
Rome's conquest of Italy took more than two centuries. Rome only suffered a serious setback once when the Gauls invaded the city in 387 B.C.E. The Romans dealt with conquered cities quite liberally, offering citizenship to some, potential citizenship to others and allied status to the rest.

Now Rome was face to face with Carthage, the great naval power of the western Mediterranean. Rome fought three major wars against Carthage from 264-241; 218-201; and 149-146 B.C.E. Roman resources and fortitude were taxed to the limit, especially in the Second Punic War against the great general Hannibal; but in the end, Carthage was completely destroyed. Rome's victory against Carthage and her success in the eastern Mediterranean against Macedonia and Antiochus III in Asia Minor from about 215-150, opened the way to Roman supervision of the entire Mediterranean region. Such was not an easy task. Greeks and Romans did not understand freedom in the same way. The Romans found themselves becoming more and more involved in the affairs of Greece and Asia. Anti-Roman factions in the Greek cities were punished severely.

Political contact with Greece had a great effect upon Roman culture. This can easily be traced in the development of Roman education. Traditionally, Roman fathers saw to the education of their sons and some (such as Cato the Elder) decried the Greek influence and the popularity of the grammaticus who taught Greek and Latin literature, dialectic, geometry, astronomy and music. Advanced study in rhetoric and philosophy opened the Roman conqueror to the older and wider culture of the Hellenistic world. Whether intended or not, Rome's expansion brought with it power, wealth and responsibility. The Roman constitution which had been well adapted to the mastery of Italy would be severely tested by the need to govern an empire beyond the seas.

By the middle of the second century B.C.E., Rome faced a serious manpower problem: peasants were losing their land and many could no longer qualify for the army. A political threat was also developing, as patrons had less control over clients who fled their land. In 133 B.C.E. a young tribune from an aristocratic family, Tiberius Gracchus, attempted to solve these problems by proposing that public land be redistributed to the poor. The bill aroused great hostility and after untraditional and unprecedented, but not illegal measures by Tiberius to pass the bill, he was murdered by a mob of senators and their clients. Nevertheless, his career brought a permanent change to Roman politics as he showed an alternative to the traditional aristocratic career: politicians could go directly to the people.

In 123 B.C.E. Tiberius' younger brother, Gaius, became tribune with a much broader platform of reforms, designed to appeal to a variety of groups. Of primary importance was his insistence that full Roman citizenship be offered to the Italian allies. This proposal failed and after he lost a bid for reelection, Gaius also was hunted down and killed under sanction of a senatorial decree.

Troubles abroad soon led to even more serious dangers. Rome faced a crisis in North Africa (against Jugurtha) and an invasion of Italy by Germanic tribes. Rome handled these well thanks to the
military ability of Marius. He soon began to enlist volunteers for the army who could not meet earlier property qualifications.

After the revolt of the frustrated Italian allies in 90 B.C.E. and the subsequent "social war," Rome offered them full citizenship. A successful general in the war, Sulla, dominated the next decade as he became consul. He then tried to restore senatorial government by reconstituting the state and restricting the powers of the people and their representatives, the tribunes.

The chapter recounts in detail the rise of Pompey and Crassus in the 70s and 60s B.C.E. Crassus was responsible for the suppression of the slave revolt of Spartacus in 73 B.C.E. and Pompey received extraordinary commands against the pirates and Mithradates. Always successful, Pompey had to share some of his glory with the great orator, Cicero, who as consul in 63 B.C.E., had saved the state from the conspiracy of Catiline. The decade of the 60s also saw the rise of Julius Caesar who combined with Pompey and Crassus in 60 B.C.E. to control the state in an association termed the "first triumvirate."

The decade of the 50's saw the death of Crassus and the polarization of Caesar and Pompey. Their coalition fell apart with Pompey supporting the senate against Caesar. In 49 B.C.E. Caesar led his troops across the Rubicon River starting a civil war which ended in 46 B.C.E. with Caesar the victor.

In the years before his death, Caesar did not spend much time in Rome. It is hard to be sure what reorganization of the state he had in mind, but he seems to have had a moderate and sensible approach to problems. On March 15, 44 B.C.E., however, Caesar was assassinated by Brutus, Cassius and other senators who hoped to restore the republic, but succeeded only in unleashing thirteen more years of civil war, after which the republic was forever dead.

The period from 44-31 B.C.E. saw the duel between Caesar's lieutenant, Mark Antony, and his eighteen year old heir, Octavian. After some pretense at cooperation, Antony chose the wealth of the east and the alliance of Cleopatra; Octavian chose the west as his power base. Octavian won a decisive victory at Actium in 31 B.C.E. which was soon followed by the suicides of Antony and Cleopatra. At the age of thirty-two, Octavian was absolute master of the Mediterranean world.

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.

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, Persius, 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.

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 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 honestiores (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 whatever. 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.

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 Nicaea 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.

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. **Roman Constitution**: One of the great achievements of the Romans was their constitution. An unwritten collection of laws based upon tradition and precedent, it sanctioned a government dependent upon two principles: annuality and collegiality. That is, more than one person held each office (with the exception of the dictatorship) and they held it generally for one year only. Each citizen was allowed to vote and did in a number of traditional assemblies. Intended to govern a city-state, the constitution was appended to meet the demands of imperial administration.

2. **Struggle of the Orders**: The period from 509 to 207 B.C.E. has been termed the "Struggle of the Orders" since the plebeians agitated for legal equality with the patricians. Gradually the plebeians, through tactics such as secession, won full legal, political and social equality with the patricians. This was achieved without bloodshed - a point which the Romans were proud of and which contrasted with the chaos and violence of the late republic.
3. **Clientage:** The client-patron relationship in Rome was very important, and domestic politics involved the workings of this relationship on many levels whether it was among aristocrats or between aristocrats and the poor. The relationship was hereditary and sanctioned by religion and custom.

4. **Roman Imperialism:** A much debated point in Roman history concerns Roman intentions in the acquisition of her empire. Did Rome have a blueprint for empire and consciously follow a policy of aggressive imperialism? The answer is probably no, but once Rome became involved in a dispute (especially in the Greek east and often by invitation), she found it difficult to remain neutral with her own interests and even survival at stake. Within about 120 years, Rome had expanded from control of the Italian peninsula to mastery of the entire Mediterranean - a transformation which would present great problems for the state in the second and first centuries B.C.E.

5. **The Reforms of the Gracchi:** The reforms instituted by the Gracchi which included redistribution of public land, colonies, Italian citizenship, subsidized grain, etc., were not illegal and in some cases even had precedent. Yet it was their method, especially that of Tiberius, which aroused the hatred of the aristocracy. Many precedents for later actions proceeded from the Gracchan episode, including murder and violent intimidation sanctioned by a dubious enactment called the "Final Decree of the Senate." A major problem which was not solved during this period was the approval of Italian citizenship. In the end, Rome would fight the Social War (90-88 B.C.E.) and win, only to agree to full Italian citizenship anyway.

6. **The Reforms of Marius:** In addition to changes in formation and weaponry, Marius changed the composition of the army as well. He began using volunteers, mostly dispossessed farmers and proletarians, who looked upon military service as a way of obtaining guaranteed food, shelter, clothing and booty from victories. Most importantly, they expected a piece of land upon discharge. Rather than looking to the Senate to provide these benefits, they expected them from their commander as fulfillment of a patron-client compact. One of the main reasons the republic collapsed was because of private armies loyal to their generals and not to the state.

7. **The Reforms of Sulla:** These were enacted in the late 80's and were designed to reestablish the Senate as the ruling institution of Rome. They called for, among other things, restrictions upon the veto power of tribunes and a halt to any advance in career after holding that office. Then only
people without ambition would hold the office and the republic would be preserved from the troublesome obstructions of such as the Gracchi or Livius Drusus the Younger. The reforms, however, were undone by 70 B.C.E., for the most part.

8. **The Assassination of Julius Caesar**: Caesar's murder by Brutus, Cassius and about 60 senators stemmed from ideologues who believed that they were ridding Rome of a tyrant and that after liberation, the republic would automatically be restored. Thus they made no plans to follow up their deed and even refused to kill Mark Antony. It is not certain if Caesar planned to become "king" of Rome although he held the title of dictator for life. It is certain, however, that he did not court the traditional aristocracy and even abused their dignity upon occasion. His heir, Octavian, would form a coalition of supporters and conservatives which proved successful in the long run.

9. **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.

10. **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 anti-Christian propaganda which portrayed them as guilty of cannibalism and incest.
11. **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 Nicaea) without abolishing the imperial cult or pagan state religion. He was not baptized, in fact, until on his deathbed. 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.

12. **Republican and Imperial Rome in World Perspective:** The history of the Republic is a sharp departure from the common experience of ancient civilizations. In the development from a monarchy to a republic founded on equitable laws, and the subsequent accumulation and administration of empire, the Romans displayed their pragmatic character. They created something unique: an empire ruled by elected magistrates with an effective power equal to the kings and emperors of China, India and Iran. However, the temptations and responsibilities of such a vast empire proved too much for the republican constitution. The influx of slaves led to the displacement of citizens, who served as professional soldiers in the service of generals seeking personal glory above loyalty to the state. The conquest of a vast empire led the Romans toward the more familiar path of development experienced by rulers in Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, India and Iran. Comparisons can be made with the Chinese "dynastic cycle" that included a period of strength and security fortified by impressive leadership. Like the former Han Dynasty in China, the Roman Empire in the west fell, leaving disunity, insecurity, disorder and poverty. Like similar empires in the ancient world, it had been unable to sustain its "immoderate greatness."

**SUGGESTED FILMS**

*Assassination of Julius Caesar.* Columbia Broadcasting System. 27 min.

*Julius Caesar: Rise of the Roman Empire.* Encyclopaedia Britannica Films. 22 min.

*Spirit of Rome.* Encyclopaedia Britannica. 29 min.

Roman World. International Film Bureau. 23 min.

The Spirit of Rome. Encyclopaedia Britannica. 30 min.

Pompeii - The Death of a City. McGraw-Hill. 14 min.

Pompeii - Once There Was a City. Learnex Corporation of Florida. 25 min.

Legacy of Rome. American Broadcasting Co. 50 min.


Christianity in World History - to 1000 C.E. Coronet. 14 min.


Decline of the Roman Empire. Coronet. 14 min.

Legacy of Rome. ABC. 50 min.