The Hellenistic Era and the Rise of Rome

Key Question
What circumstances are likely to undermine governments by the people?

Greek intellectuals tended to feel superior to non-Greeks, but Polybius (c. 201-120 B.C.E.) was an exception. He admired the Romans even though they repeatedly invaded his homeland, defeated its armies, and in 168 B.C.E. carted him and a thousand of his fellows off to Rome as hostages. In Rome he was treated more as a guest than a prisoner and was admitted to the highest levels of Roman society. Publius Cornelius Scipio Aemilianus Africanus Numantinus (185-129 B.C.E.), whose imposing name catalogued his aristocratic connections and professional achievements, became his friend, and for 16 years Polybius enjoyed an insider’s view of the workings of the Roman Republic.

Polybius’s acute awareness of Greece’s political problems contributed to his respect for his captor-hosts. The Greeks were better at the arts of war than those of peace. About 130 years before Polybius’s birth, Alexander the Great had distracted the Greeks from fighting among themselves by turning their attention to the conquest of the Persian Empire. He led them on a triumphant march from the Aegean to Egypt and east to the Indus River Valley. At Alexander’s death, his great empire came apart, and the Greeks returned to making war on one another.

The Romans shared Indo-European ancestry and many other things with the Greeks. Their civilization developed more slowly, but Polybius believed that they would ultimately
The Macedonians were a tribal people who had not taken to life in with a unique genius for leadership would unite the Greeks and protect them from their semibarbarous kingdom of Macedonia on the northern rim of the Greek mainland. The stability and longevity of Rome’s empire was a hard-won prize for which the Romans paid dearly. The Romans began their climb to world domination by throwing off monarchy and embracing a form of government they called a Republic. It was not a direct democracy, such as Athens had established, but it gave significant power to its citizenry. The Romans developed a passionate affection for their republican system, and their patriotic military service in its defense led ultimately to the acquisition of a territorial empire. Administration of an empire proved, however, to be difficult for the Republic, and the methods the Romans devised simply set them up for a century-long civil war. Peace was not achieved until a skillful leader persuaded the Romans that submission to his monarchical leadership was essential to save their Republic. As the republican trappings of his system fell away, Rome became an openly autocratic Empire. The Empire limited freedoms but it delivered a long period of relative peace and prosperity. As you reflect on Rome’s history, consider the challenges that face democracies and republics as they try to reconcile the inherent inefficiency of government by the masses with a state’s need for a swift and decisive executive.

The Hellenistic Era

The Peloponnesian War (432–404 B.C.E.) had no real winner. Athens yielded to Sparta, but Sparta collapsed under the burdens of victory. Sparta owed its military preeminence to a unique social system that enabled it to field the only full-time professional army in Greece. The lengthy Peloponnesian conflict neutralized that advantage by professionalizing the armies of many Greek poleis. Thebes finally dispelled the myth of Spartan invincibility by routing Sparta’s armies in fair fights, but Thebes failed to fill the leadership vacuum left by Sparta’s decline. Greece’s poleis formed leagues and alliances, and fell to fighting among themselves. War became a major Greek industry—producing hordes of mercenaries who found employment at home and abroad.

This dismal situation convinced some Greeks that their compatriots were incapable of self-government. Men as different as the philosopher Plato (c. 429–347 B.C.E.), the soldier-historian Xenophon (c. 435–355 B.C.E.), and the Athenian orator Isocrates (346–338 B.C.E.) advocated some form of monarchy. Their hope was that an individual with a unique genius for leadership would unite the Greeks and protect them from their ancient enemy, Persia.

Macedonia Takes Control When people decide that they need a savior, candidates for the job appear. Greece’s savior emerged from an unexpected quarter, from the semibarbarous kingdom of Macedonia on the northern rim of the Greek mainland. The Macedonians were a tribal people who had not taken to life in poleis and who had even backed the Persians against their fellow Greeks in the Persian Wars. In the mid-fifth century B.C.E., however, Macedonian kings decided to Hellenize their subjects. They established a capital at Pella and ornamented their court with artists, craftsmen, and intellectuals imported from the more advanced Greek states. Men as distinguished as Athens’ tragic playwright Euripides and the philosopher-scientist Aristotle entered their service. Despite this, Macedonia remained a rough, politically volatile country. The hereditary chiefs of its tribes were powerful, and coups and battles shortened the lives of its kings. Eight men ascended Macedonia’s throne during the first four decades of the fourth century B.C.E.

In 360 B.C.E. King Perdiccas III died in battle, and his brother, Philip II (r. 360–336 B.C.E.), won the ensuing struggle for the crown. Philip spent two or three years of his youth as a hostage in Thebes which gave him a chance to observe Greek politics at close hand and to acquire training in the best Greek military techniques. Philip used what he had learned to transform the Macedonian army and unite his kingdom’s tribal factions.

During the 350s B.C.E. some poleis sought Philip’s help in their wars with their neighbors, and this gave him an excuse to intervene in the affairs of the Greek states. As one war led to another, the Athenian orator Demosthenes (384–322 B.C.E.) tried to rally opposition to Philip in the name of defending democracy, but in 338 B.C.E. the Macedonian army won a decisive victory over Athens and Thebes at Chaeronea. Further resistance seemed futile, so most of the mainland states accepted Philip’s invitation to a peace conference to be held at Corinth in 337 B.C.E. At the meeting, Philip persuaded the Greeks to join him in an attack on Persia, but on the eve of this campaign he was assassinated. His son, Alexander (who may have been implicated in his murder), seized the Macedonian throne.

Alexander (III) the Great Alexander was not cast in the mold of his father. Philip was a brute of a man who enjoyed physically and psychologically intimidating others. Alexander, who had the slight build of a runner, was distinguished by will and nervous energy more than muscle. His youthful appearance was enhanced by his habit of shaving, a custom that spread as his reputation grew. Alexander (r. 336–323 B.C.E.) was only 20 years old when his father died, but he had considerable military experience. He commanded the elite cavalry unit in Philip’s army that carried the day for the Macedonians at the crucial battle of Chaeronea.

Alexander assured the Greeks that he intended to lead them in the Persian War his father had proposed, but he had to delay its start. He was not the only man with a claim to Philip’s throne, and his survival was uncertain. Young, untried rulers face tests to their authority, and Alexander spent the first year of his reign eliminating potential rivals and fighting for control of his kingdom. Anti-Macedonian Greeks confidently anticipated his failure and began to scheme against him. This ended when he suddenly descended on Thebes, the rebels’ ringleader, and destroyed the city. Similar acts of terror might have forced the Greeks to cooperate temporarily, but Alexander knew that he could not hold them against their will once he and his army were locked in combat with Persia far from home. The Greeks would inevitably rebel and isolate him in enemy territory. His survival, therefore, depended on inspiring them with genuine enthusiasm for him and his campaign.
Alexander left Greece, never to return, in the spring of 334 B.C.E. His army was ludicrously small for the task he set. He had about 37,000 men, but over 23,000 of these were Greek allies whose loyalty was doubtful. The core of Alexander's army consisted of 12,000 Macedonian infantrymen and 1,800 cavalry, most of whom were more closely tied to their hereditary chiefs (Philip's contemporaries) than to their young king.

Alexander was ahead of his time in understanding what skillful management of public relations can do for a ruler. At the campaign's start, he made a side trip to Troy to sacrifice at what was said to be the grave of Achilles, the hero of the Iliad. He wanted the Greeks to link the war on which they were embarking with him with the epic victory their Homeric ancestors had won over Greece's first eastern enemy. Alexander also began the development of something like the modern press corps. It consisted of a troop of scholars, headed by Callisthenes (the nephew of Alexander's boyhood tutor, Aristotle), whose job was to build enthusiasm for the campaign by providing the homeland with reports of its progress and descriptions of the exotic locales it discovered.

Alexander desperately needed a quick victory that would assure his men that he could deliver what he promised. The Persians might have defeated him by retreating. If they had drawn him deep into their territory, his soldiers would have grown increasingly fearful until they panicked, turned on him, and fled home. The Persians chose instead to give Alexander exactly what he had to have. They made a stand at the Granikos River in western Asia Minor (334 B.C.E.).

Alexander understood that he would have no second chances in this war. Only by appearing utterly self-confident and invincible could he distract his men from the odds they faced. At the first hint of failure, they were likely to lose heart and desert him. Therefore, he threw everything he had into every engagement. He commanded the most dangerous posts in each battle and performed heroic acts that inspired his men to comparable feats. The strategy worked, but it placed an all but unbearable burden on Alexander. The king's injuries mounted as the war progressed. He was often ill. The hardships of the march sapped his strength, and the stress of command tested his will.

At Granikos the ferocity of Alexander's attack swept the Persians from the field, but Alexander resisted the temptation to pursue them. He slowed the pace of the march and spent a year exploiting his victory, building the morale of his men, and picking up allies. It was the spring of 333 B.C.E. before he reached the Taurus Mountains and crossed from Asia Minor into Syria. The Persian emperor, Darius III (r. 336–330 B.C.E.), was eager to confront him, but faulty intelligence led the Persian army astray. By the time Darius found Alexander, impatience may have been clouding the emperor's judgment. At the Issos River on the Syrian coast he committed himself to a battle on a narrow field where he could not deploy his superior numbers. Alexander struck the center of the Persian line, and when Darius pulled back, his men panicked and fled (see Map 5–1).

Darius retreated from Issos in disarray, but Alexander did not go after him. Alexander could not risk proceeding inland, for the Persians controlled the sea. If Darius's navy had invaded the Aegean, Alexander would have had to go home to defend Greece. Because Alexander had insufficient ships with which to challenge the Persians at sea, the only way he could neutralize their fleet was to take all of the ports from which it operated. This required arduous sieges of city after city until the whole coast as far as Egypt was in Greek hands.

By July 331 B.C.E., Alexander was finally free to leave Egypt and strike inland to challenge Darius. Darius wisely waited for Alexander to come to him and chose a battlefield that gave him all the advantages. The Persians dug in at Gaugamela, an arid plain north of Babylon. It provided ample space for them to maneuver and forced the Greeks to camp in a place that had no water. Despite the Persians' superior numbers and position, the Greeks triumphed at Gaugamela, but they were never entirely sure how. Dust and poor communications prevented anyone from having an overview of the battle.

Darius's army may have been too large for its own good. At any rate, it was thrown into confusion by Alexander's attacks, and Darius had to flee once again. Babylon submitted. The Persians claimed the imperial treasury at Susa and made their winter camp at the Persian capital, Persepolis. The following spring, Alexander renewed the campaign. When Darius ordered another retreat, his disgruntled officers assassinated him.
The Greeks had done what they set out to do—conquer the Persian Empire. Most assumed, therefore, that it was time to go home, but Alexander persuaded them to continue the war a little longer. He led them farther and farther east into unknown territory. They wandered through the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains and finally descended into the Indus River Valley. At that point, they dug in their heels and refused to go on. Alexander agreed to lead them home, but only if they vowed: (1) to fight their way back through new territory, and (2) to return a year later to resume their conquests. The Greeks battled their way down the Indus River to the Indian Ocean and then endured a brutal march across the wastes of the Gedrosian Desert. A remnant of the army staggered back to Babylon, where Alexander threw himself into organizing his conquests and planning future campaigns.

Alexander did not have the manpower to occupy his huge empire and hold it by force. He had to induce his non-Greek subjects to submit to him voluntarily. His plan was to bolster his legitimacy in their eyes by adopting Persian court customs and adding Persian soldiers to his army. His Greeks and Macedonian followers strongly objected, but in the end Alexander got his way. He also tried to interfere as little as possible with the lives of his new subjects. The Persian Empire was composed of districts called satrapies. Their borders were drawn to respect the ethnic identities of their inhabitants. Alexander appointed a native governor (who knew the local customs) to handle each satrapy’s civil affairs, a Greek to deal with its fiscal administration, and a Macedonian to provide for its defense. This gave the residents of a satrapy at least one leader with whom they could identify and made it difficult for any single official to take over a satrapy and use it against the central government.

Alexander demanded extraordinary things of himself, and he finally exhausted his physical resources. On May 29, 323 B.C.E., following an all-night drinking bout with his officers, he fell ill. His fever rose. He sank into a coma, and on June 10, 323 B.C.E., he quietly died. There were rumors that he had been poisoned, but no evidence of foul play was uncovered. Fevers were common in swampy Babylon, and Alexander’s arduous lifestyle must have sapped his strength and weakened his resistance.

**The Hellenistic Environment** Alexander was only 32 when he died, and he was not the kind of man who cared to think about mortality. Death surprised him before he had provided himself with a successor. Alexander’s primary emotional attachments were homosexual. He delayed marriage, and he had no children by mistresses. In 327 B.C.E. he had wed an Iranian princess named Roxane, and after returning to Babylon, he had also married one of Darius’s daughters. Both women may have been pregnant at the time of his death. The Persian princess did not long outlive Alexander, but Roxane made him the posthumous father of a son, Alexander IV. Alexander’s generals declared themselves regents for the infant, dispatched him to Macedonia to be raised, and set about carving up his empire. This inaugurated a period of shifting alliances and bloody conflicts. By 317 B.C.E. the surviving generals had disposed of Alexander’s son, wife, and mother, and the outlines of a lasting division of his empire had emerged. The Aegean and the Macedonian throne went to Antigonus the One-Eyed (d. 301 B.C.E.). Seleukos (c. 358–280 B.C.E.), governor of Babylon, claimed the Persian heartland, and Ptolemy (d. 285 B.C.E.), one of Alexander’s boyhood friends, made himself pharaoh of Egypt. Ptolemy also hijacked Alexander’s body and enshrined it in a mausoleum in Alexandria, a great port in the Egyptian delta that Alexander had founded.

Alexander’s empire did not survive, but his imperial conquests had lasting significance. They marked the end of the Hellenic (Greek) period and the beginning of the Hellenistic (Greek-like) phase in Western civilization. Greeks had always avoided mixing with “barbarians” (non-Greeks), but Alexander believed that a blending of peoples and cultures was essential for the survival of his empire. He promoted intermarriage between his men and his eastern subjects, and he was willing to learn from the peoples he conquered and to adapt to their expectations.

The garrisons that were posted throughout Alexander’s empire grew into Greek towns that spread Hellenic culture as far east as India. It is debatable how much influence the Greeks had on indigenous peoples, but these peoples clearly influenced the Greeks. As thousands of Greeks migrated to the new towns that had been founded in the wake of Alexander’s armies, they became a more cosmopolitan people. Their widening view of the world even affected their language. Its grammar and syntax simplified, and its vocabulary grew much richer as it assimilated words from other tongues. The result was a flexible new koine (“common”) Greek that was so adaptable that it became the international medium of communication. When the Romans added the eastern rim of the Mediterranean to their empire in the first century B.C.E., they found Greek so well established that they used it rather than imposing Latin on their subjects. Many Romans were bilingual, and the early Christians (even those who were born Jews) wrote their New Testament in koine Greek instead of the language of the Hebrew scriptures.

The Hellenistic era witnessed the decline of the polis, the institution that had nurtured Hellenism. This signaled a significant change in the environment for civilized life in the Mediterranean world. Small, self-governing city-states had failed to maintain order in the Greek world. As they succumbed to the builders of empires, political power
shifted from their citizens to the bureaucrats who administered those empires. The Hellenistic era preferred professionals to citizen-volunteers. This was not necessarily bad, for the highly trained specialists who served Hellenistic rulers were extremely competent and able to plan and execute great projects. They laid out orderly cities and equipped them with magnificent temples, monuments, baths, theaters, and arenas. They built sewage systems. They constructed aqueducts to convey fresh water over great distances. They organized police forces, regulated commerce and food supplies, and generally made urban life far more comfortable, clean, and secure than it had ever been.

Hellenistic communities were as prosperous as they were well run. Alexander returned to circulation a great deal of gold that had been sealed away in Persia's coffers, and the consolidation of large territorial states by his successors made trade easier and promoted economic growth.

There was, of course, a cost for the comforts of the new societies. As governments grew larger and specialists assumed responsibility for more governmental functions, the power of popular assemblies and elected officials declined. A citizen's vote meant little to a huge, centrally managed state, and it had no use for his amateur military service or advice. Even his labor was not all that important, for wars replenished the supply of inexpensive slaves who did much of society's essential work.

**Hellenistic Civilization** The subjects of the Hellenistic states were prosperous and well cared for, but they were pawns of forces beyond their control. For those who came from *poleis* proud of their democratic traditions, this required some emotional adjustment. The Hellenic *poleis* affirmed the worth of the individual by demanding much from him, but a Hellenistic empire reduced the individual to a replaceable cog in the machinery of a great state. The world of the *poleis* was human in scale and amenable to control, but empires rendered their subjects small and impotent.

The art and literature of the Hellenistic era reflect the period's new sociopolitical environment. Theater flourished, but playwrights steered clear of political issues and focused on entertainment. Aristophanes, the master of Hellenic Old Comedy, used laughter to make people think, but Hellenistic *New Comedy* was the ancient world's equivalent of a television 'sit-com.' It relied on stock characters and plots that were as silly as they were predictable. Persons who wanted comparable entertainment at home turned to the era's new literary genre, the novel. The most popular novels were erotic romances set in exotic places or idealized bucolic locales. They conjured up fantasy worlds and provided escapist entertainment for literate urbanites.

Hellenistic architecture and visual arts, like the era's literature, appealed to emotion more than to intellect. Buildings grew large and imposing. The first skyscraper (a 400-foot-tall lighthouse) was erected on an island in the harbor of Alexandria. The city of Ephesus on the coast of Asia Minor built a temple to Diana that was almost five times the size of Athens' Parthenon, the largest of the mainland's Hellenic temples. The port of Rhodes erected a bronze statue of the sun god that may have been 120 feet tall, about the height of America's Statue of Liberty. Sculptors developed incredible technique that imparted stunning realism to their work, and they expanded their range far beyond the Hellenic era's idealized male athletes. They sought out subjects that were novel and emotionally stirring: portraits of individuals, erotic female nudes, cute children and animals, persons suffering the ravages of age and poverty, and men and women in the throes of death or extreme passions. The human ideal, the art of the democratic *poleis*, lost some of its relevance for the subjects of the Hellenistic empires. They lacked the political freedoms that gave dignity and meaning to *poleis* citizenship and made Hellenic ideals worth striving for. What they wanted was art that dispelled boredom and affirmed the values of uniqueness and individuality that the imperial context threatened.

Most schools of Hellenistic philosophy focused on developing "philosophies of life" that were designed to help individuals come to terms with their new cultural and political environment. The most popular of these urged people to distance themselves in some way from the world around them. Zeno (335–263 B.C.E.), the founder of the Stoics, preached acceptance of the inevitable. He maintained that everyone had a preordained place in the universe's unalterable, rational system. Fulfillment lay in doing the duties of one's station while cultivating an emotional detachment that preserved inner peace. Stoics warned that people could not control what happened to them but claimed that they could control their emotional responses to life's vicissitudes. Zeno's contemporary, Epicurus (341–270 B.C.E.), believed that everything that existed (including the human soul) was the result of random, temporary conjunctions of atoms and that nothing, therefore, had meaning or permanence. Because lasting achievements were impossible, life's only purpose, he concluded, was the enjoyment of pleasure. However, true pleasure was not ecstasy and sensual indulgence, but tranquility, a state undisturbed by extreme emotions of any kind. Individuals who retreated from the world to 'cultivate their gardens' had the best chance of achieving happiness, for they avoided situations that might stir the emotions. The followers of Diogenes of Sinope (c. 400–325 B.C.E.) were called Cynics ("dogs"). Diogenes claimed that fulfillment
derived from self-sufficiency, and self-sufficiency was achieved by minimizing one's needs and obligations. The Cynics were likened to dogs because, like animals, they spurned all social conventions and freely did whatever came naturally. Diogenes lived in the street, expressed contempt for authority, and performed intimate bodily functions in public. The Cynics, Epicureans, and Stoics all agreed that individuals had no mastery over the world; the best they could do was to master themselves. This was a far less ambitious assessment of human potential than the visions that had inspired the social engineers of the Hellenic poleis.

Hellenistic Greeks still had confidence in the superiority of their civilization, and their desire to explore and to learn only grew as their empires broadened their horizons and stimulated their curiosity. Hellenistic monarchs provided unprecedented patronage for intellectuals—particularly the Egyptian dynasty founded by Alexander's friend, Ptolemy I (r. 323–285 B.C.E.). The Ptolemaic pharaohs established a library in Alexandria and set the goal of obtaining a copy of every important book. They dispatched agents abroad in search of rare volumes. They funded translations (including one of the Hebrew scriptures), and they even searched the baggage of travelers entering Egypt, hoping to find interesting texts. The result was a collection that may have numbered a million items.

A research institute was attached to Alexandria's library. It was called the Museum, the home of the Muses (the nine female deities who, according to the poet Hesiod, preside over the arts). Some of the Museum's scholars devoted their lives to refining the library's collection and building on its contents. They compiled dictionaries and catalogues, and wrote commentaries on classic texts. What their work lacked in originality, it made up for in quantity. A certain Didymus of Alexandria is said to have written 3,500 books—not one of which survives!

Pedantry did not characterize all the work at the Museum. Some of its scholars pioneered new literary genres. The most popular of these was a sophisticated pastoral poetry that romanticized rural life and reveled in obscure, learned references. The Museum was especially noted for encouraging progress in the sciences and mathematics. Euclid (fl. c. 300 B.C.E.) wrote the text that has made his name synonymous with geometry, and Archimedes of Syracuse (c. 287–212 B.C.E.) laid the groundwork for calculus. Eratosthenes of Cyrene (c. 270–194 B.C.E.) calculated Earth's circumference with remarkable accuracy. Hipparchus of Nicaea (c. 160–125 B.C.E.) made precise calendar calculations. Aristarchus of Samos (fl. c. 275 B.C.E.) advanced the theory that Earth was a globe that rotated on an axis and revolved around the sun, but for the next 1,500 years, most astronomers supported the contention of a non-royal Ptolemy of Alexandria (fl. c. 130 B.C.E.) that the sun revolves around Earth. The Hippocratic medical texts were edited at the Museum, and some of its physicians conducted important anatomical research. Herophilus of Chalcedon (fl. c. 270 B.C.E.) mapped the sensory nerves and identified the brain as the center of a nervous system. Although capillaries were too small to be seen by the naked eye, Erasistratus of Ceos (fl. c. 260 B.C.E.) hypothesized that veins and arteries were connected, a prelude to the discovery of blood circulation and the function of the heart.

Alexandrian technicians and engineers produced marvelous gadgets that ranged from useful pumps and astronomical instruments to amusing toys (one of which was a working model of a steam turbine). To the modern mind, the most puzzling thing about all of this activity is that so little of it found practical application. The fact that Hellenistic society was slave-based may have something to do with this. Its educated classes were not motivated to think of ways to make work easier, and its workers had little freedom to innovate.

The Origin of Rome

Hellenistic civilization spread to, and was spread by, the Romans. The Latins (Rome's founders) took it readily, for they had much in common with the Greeks. Both peoples had Indo-European ancestry, and their languages were related. They settled in their respective homelands at about the same time (c. 1900 B.C.E.), and their cultures evolved in similar environments. The Greeks, however, got off to an earlier and faster start, for they had the stimulating advantage of close contacts with the civilizations of the Middle East.

The Italian Environment

The Aegean Sea and its many islands facilitated communication between Greece and the Middle East, but Italy faced west. Like the Greek mainland, Italy is a mountainous peninsula. All its major agricultural plains and most of its natural harbors are on its western coast, and the Apennine mountain chain forms a spine along its eastern edge that makes access from the Adriatic Sea difficult.

The Greeks planted Naples (Neapolis, "New Town") and other colonies in Campania, Italy's southwestern plain, in the mid-eighth century B.C.E. At the same time, the Etruscans, a people whose origin has been much debated, built prosperous city-states on the plain of Etruria (Tuscany) north of the Tiber River. The Latins took their name from the small plain of Latium ("flat land") that lay between Campania and Etruria. North of Etruria and the Apennines was the great basin of the Po River. It was inhabited by Celtic tribes and considered by the Romans to belong to Gaul more than Italy (see Map 5–2).

The Kingdom of Rome

The Romans were aware that their Latin ancestors had lived in Latium for a long time before they established the city of Rome, but they knew little about them. Homer's epics provided the classical world with what it assumed to be its earliest history, so the Romans looked to Homer to supply them with a past. Because Romans were not Greeks, they sought an ancestor from the Iliaid's other nation, the Trojans. The attention of Roman myth-makers centered on a Trojan prince named Aeneas, who escaped Troy's fall. After several adventures, he allegedly landed on the plain of Latium and married Lavinia, daughter of the native king, Latinus. Thirteen generations of their descendants reigned over Latium before...
Map 5-2  The Rise of Rome  The Apennine Mountains form a crescent-shaped wall running the length of the Italian peninsula. They impede access to Italy from the east and cradle the three western agricultural plains (Campania, Latium, and Etruria) where urban communities first appeared in Italy. The ancient Romans considered the Po Valley north of the Apennines part of Gaul, not Italy.

Question: Did Rome’s location inevitably make it the seat of a great empire, or was its location inconvenient for an imperial capital?

Rome’s founders, the twins Romulus and Remus, were born to a Latin princess and Mars, the Latins’ god of war. The city that Romulus founded (and that bore his name) was said to have begun as a rough frontier post populated by outcasts and women abducted from the surrounding region. Although this colorful myth of Rome’s origin is fanciful, it nonetheless contains some truth.

The traditional date for Rome’s founding is April 21, 753 B.C.E. Archaeological evidence confirms the existence of several primitive villages on the hills next to the Tiber in the mid-eighth century B.C.E. and suggests why the Latins might have planted them there at that time. Rome came to occupy the first spot inland from the coast (about 20 miles) where the Tiber River narrowed enough to be easily bridged. In the mid-eighth century B.C.E., when the Greek and Etruscan civilizations that flourished on either side of Latium developed trade routes converging at the Tiber crossing, the Latins hastened to occupy this corner of their territory.

Seven kings are said to have reigned over Rome from 753 B.C.E. to 509 B.C.E. They ruled in tandem with an aristocratic council called the Senate (senex, “elder”). Most of the stories told about the monarchy are legends, but some historical information can be gleaned from them. Etruscan names are recorded for two of Rome’s kings, and it is unlikely that the Romans would have invented a memory of a time when outsiders ruled their city if this had not been the case. There is ample evidence of Etruscan influence on Roman institutions and customs, but this does not necessarily imply Etruscan occupation of Rome. The Romans may have chosen Etruscan leaders to strengthen commercial or political ties with Etruria.

The Etruscans  Much that was unique about Rome can be traced to the Etruscans, but the Etruscans themselves remain something of a mystery. Their language is not related to any known tongue and, apart from words whose meaning has been provided by ancient Latin authors or can be inferred from context, it is largely untranslated. Most surviving specimens are short inscriptions. Etruscan cities developed very quickly (possibly in response to the trade that was increasing between Italy and the eastern Mediterranean in the eighth century B.C.E.). Etruria had a benign climate, fertile fields, and accessible deposits of metal ores. The skills of its gold and bronze workers were second to none. Etruscan traders had much to offer, and they took to the sea to compete with Greek and Phoenician merchants.

Stories circulated in the Greek and Latin worlds about the luxury and permissiveness of Etruscan society. The Greeks were shocked by the freedom enjoyed by Etruscan women, and the Romans, who wrested austere livings from small plots of poor land, insisted that the Etruscans’ self-indulgent custom of feasting twice a day was evidence of their moral laxity. Some Etruscans were undeniably rich, for they built expensive subterranean chamber-tombs that replicated their lavishly furnished homes and banquet halls. The favorite design for a sarcophagus was a dining couch with an effigy of the deceased reclining on its lid—at ease in festive clothes, wine cup in hand. Etruscan graves have yielded some of the finest specimens of pottery, jewelry, and bronze work to survive from the classical era.

The Etruscans may have been connoisseurs of life’s pleasures, but wealth did not make them soft. They dominated Italy until the mid-fifth century. Their decline was caused, at least in part, by the failure of their independent city-states to cooperate in countering competition from the Greeks. The Greeks planted colonies on both sides of Etruria and battled the Etruscans for control of the sea.

The Romans owed many of their political symbols and social customs to the Etruscans, but it was in the area of religion that they were most aware of their debt.
An Etruscan Couple This sarcophagus from the sixth century B.C.E. depicts what are probably an Etruscan husband and wife resting at ease on a dining couch. Greeks and Romans often reclined while eating. In early Rome, however, women sat while men reclined. Although a Roman woman of the republican era had more freedom than her Greek sister, neither may have enjoyed as much independence as a contemporary Etruscan lady. Sarcophagus of a married couple on a funeral bed. Etruscan, from Cerveteri, 6th BCE. Terracotta. Lewandowski/Öjedsa. Musee Lourve, Paris, France. RMN Reunion Des Musees Nationaux/Art Resource, NY

Throughout Rome’s history, colleges of priests perpetuated ancient rituals and sacrifices of Etruscan origin. Romans saw omens everywhere and studied them before undertaking any project. They were especially in awe of the presumed skills of Etruscan diviners and soothsayers. Long after the Etruscan civilization disappeared, the Romans preserved Etruscan as a dead language used primarily in arcane religious rites. A similar fate was, of course, one day to befall Latin.

The Roman Republic

Rome made significant progress under the leadership of its later kings, one or more of whom had ties with the Etruscan city of Tarquinia. The Romans drained the swampy lowland that separated the hills on which they lived to create the Forum, a place for markets and assemblies. They built the largest temple in Italy on the Capitoline hill, and archaeological evidence suggests that they enjoyed a rising standard of living.

Kings may not deserve all the credit for early Rome’s progress, for they operated under the watchful eye of the city’s Senate. Relations between the monarch and the aristocratic families represented in the Senate must often have been strained. Few of Rome’s kings (including the city’s founder) were said to have died peacefully in their beds, and eventually the Senators decided to dispense with kings and govern the city themselves.

The Roman Revolution Legends blame Sextus, the aptly named son of King Tarquinius Superbus (Tarquin the Proud), for the fall of his father’s throne. In 509 B.C.E. Sextus supposedly raped a virtuous Roman matron named Lucretia, a deed that so infuriated the Romans that they drove out the Tarquins and vowed never again to submit to a king. The story may be fanciful, but the revolution was real.

The republic that the revolutionaries established to govern Rome was not a democracy. It limited political privileges to the male members of the city’s “patrician” families. Early Rome was a federation of extended families, and for reasons that even the Romans could not explain, citizen families were divided into two classes: the noble patricians and the common plebeians. In the early republic, only the former could hold political offices and priesthoods.

Family was such an important determiner of status that each Roman male needed three names to indicate the place he occupied in the social order. His first name was one of a few common names used only by close friends. His second identified his gens, the great clan to which his paternal ancestors belonged. His third indicated his birth family. If his achievements were notable, the city might commemorate them by granting him a fourth name. The winner of a war in Africa, for example, bore the ponderous name Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus.

A Roman familia included not only immediate blood kin but all the dependents of a household—including slaves. The male head of a familia, the paterfamilias, had

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Greek Gods</th>
<th>Roman Equivalents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Zeus</td>
<td>Jupiter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hera</td>
<td>Juno</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athena</td>
<td>Minerva</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apollo</td>
<td>[Apollo]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artemis</td>
<td>Diana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hephaestus</td>
<td>Vulcan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aphrodite</td>
<td>Venus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ares</td>
<td>Mars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demeter</td>
<td>Ceres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poseidon</td>
<td>Neptun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hades</td>
<td>Pluto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hestia</td>
<td>Vesta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermes</td>
<td>Mercury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dionysus</td>
<td>Bacchus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Greeks and Romans both were Indo-European people, so it is not surprising that their state religions were similar. However, few of their gods and goddesses had Indo-European ancestry. Zeus or Jupiter (Deiw-pitar, “Father of the Bright Sky”) had impeccable Indo-European credentials, but some of his children (Apollo, for instance) had Middle-Eastern origins. Comparable gods did not always have the same significance for Greeks and Romans. Mars, for example, loomed large in the Roman pantheon as the god who brought victory in war. Ares, his Greek double, was a far less respected deity, a symbol of the negative passions that spark conflict.
absolute authority over all its members. His sons never outgrew his power, and he could, if he wished, order their execution.

Some of Rome's plebeian families were as ancient as (and richer than) their patrician superiors. The Senate expected them to contribute their men to its army, but it refused to allow them any role in government. Not surprisingly, they refused to accept this, and a "struggle of the orders," the challenge they mounted to the patrician monopoly of political power, dominated the early history of the republic. The plebeians were able to force concessions from the Senate because the patrician Senate needed plebeian help to defend the city. Whenever the Senate balked at the demands of the plebeians, they threatened a military strike. These confrontations usually ended in compromises that, over the course of two centuries, forged a complex constitution for the republic.

In 471 B.C.E. the plebeians set up an assembly of their own headed by ten magistrates called tribunes. In 451 B.C.E. they won acceptance of the Twelve Tables, a law code establishing a common standard of justice for all citizens. In 445 B.C.E. marriage between patrician and plebeian families was legalized, and elective offices began to be opened to plebeian candidates. In 287 B.C.E. the Hortensian Law made plebiscites (votes by the people) binding on all Romans. This granted legislative authority to the people, but the result was hardly a triumph for democracy. The effect of the new laws was to permit intermarriage between wealthy patrician and plebeian families and to create a complicated system of checks and balances that allowed these wealthy families to dominate the republic.

The republic's complex organization was designed to prevent any individual from acquiring enough power to reestablish monarchy. All elected magistrates served terms of only one year, and they were forbidden to seek immediate reelection. The duties of the chief executive were shared by two consuls—the expectation being that each would keep the other in check. The consuls' authority over soldiers in the field (their imperium) was absolute, but their power in the city was limited. To prevent them from seizing control of Rome, their armies were strictly forbidden to cross the city's sacred boundary. If the Senate wished to honor a general, it showed its trust by suspending this rule and granting him a "triumph" (permission to parade his men through the city).

The diffusion of power in Rome made alliances necessary and encouraged influence peddling and a system of patronage. The poorer citizens needed the support and protection of those who were richer and more powerful. A patron advertised his importance by parading through the streets accompanied by a crowd of his clients. They gave him political clout, for they voted as he commanded or risked losing his job. The republic's magistrates were not paid, and they were expected to fund the costs of their offices from their private fortunes. A man who wanted a major office also had to spend years pursuing it. The cursus honorum ("path of honors") decreed a sequence of lower offices that a man had to win before he qualified to run for higher ones.

The Roman Republic was so far from what most people today would regard as an equitable government that one wonders why the Romans were so attached to it. They, of course, did not have the advantage of a modern perspective and did not feel deprived of rights they had never imagined. But they also had a good reason to be proud of their republic. It won them an empire.

The Republic Acquires an Empire At the start of the fifth century B.C.E., Rome was a tiny, landlocked city-state that had no obvious potential to become an imperialistic power. Its survival was threatened by enemies that attacked from every direction: Etruscan, Greek, Latin, and Celtic. Time and again, however, the Romans rose to the challenge and built on their victories by generous treatment of those whom they defeated. The republic annexed some territory and garrisoned some places with military colonies, but it created more allies than subjects. One by one, Italy's city-states (some eagerly and others lacking alternatives) joined Rome in a federation. They retained control over their domestic affairs, but submitted to Rome's foreign policy and contributed to its armies. The rights some allies were given to trade with Rome, to migrate to Rome, and to marry Romans helped spread Roman customs and language and create a common culture for Italy.

Rome's consolidation of Italy was viewed with suspicion by the western Mediterranean's other major power, the Carthaginian empire. While the Greeks were planting their colonies in Sicily and Italy in the mid-eighth century B.C.E., their seafaring competitors, the Phoenicians, were colonizing the Mediterranean's southern rim. Their chief outpost, the North African city of Carthage, emerged as the administrative center of a self-sufficient empire that closed the southwestern corner of the Mediterranean to outsiders. The primary threat to the Carthaginians came from the Greeks on the island of Sicily. Carthage believed that it had to hold the western end of Sicily to protect its sea lanes (see Map 5–3).

Sicily was perpetually at war. Its Greek poleis fought among themselves and with the Carthaginians, and Syracuse, the largest Greek city on Sicily, sought to unite the island under its control. In 265 B.C.E., the Romans added to the confusion by acceding to a request from the Sicilian city of Messana for military assistance. (Messana commanded the narrow strait between Sicily and Italy through which Italy's shipping passed.) Carthage and Syracuse were both alarmed by Rome's intervention in their sphere of influence, and the situation quickly escalated into a major conflict called the First Punic (Phoenician) War (264–241 B.C.E.). The war dragged on because Carthage and Rome were incompatible military powers. Carthage fought at sea with its navy, and Rome campaigned on land with its army. Neither made much progress until Rome built a navy and set out to meet Carthage on its own terms. Carthage finally decided that the war was not worth its cost, and it ceded Sicily to Rome in exchange for peace.

The Romans had not set out to conquer Sicily, but the war convinced them that they had to hold the island to prevent anyone from using it as a base for invading Italy. Because their interests in Sicily were primarily defensive, they declared it a military
province and turned it over to a Roman general. This first province in what was to become a Roman Empire altered the politics of the republic in unanticipated ways. Rome refused to shoulder the expense of maintaining its army in Sicily and ordered its commander to raise the funds he needed from the Sicilians themselves. This gave him an opportunity to loot the province and return to Rome much richer than when he left. He could then pour his new wealth into a campaign to win more offices and honors. As Rome’s leaders discovered the advantages a provincial governorship gave a man in the game of Roman politics, the republic’s foreign policy began to change.

By expanding into Spain, Carthage recovered from the First Punic War much more quickly than Rome expected. Its leading general, Hamilcar Barca (c. 270–228 B.C.E.), believed that things were not settled between his people and the Romans, and his suspicions increased in 238 B.C.E., when Rome ordered Carthage to surrender the island of Sardinia. Rome may only have wanted to make sure that Carthage could not use Sardinia to attack Italy, but by annexing Sardinia, it confirmed Carthage’s fear that Rome was bent on its destruction. Hamilcar Barca’s son, Hannibal (247–182 B.C.E.), inherited his father’s belief that war with Rome was inevitable. The Romans, for their part, felt fairly secure. Control of the seas around Italy gave them confidence that if war came, it would be fought on Carthaginian territory.

When the Second Punic War (218–202 B.C.E.) broke out, the Romans dispatched their armies to Spain and Sicily to confront Hannibal and his forces. But Hannibal was not where they expected to find him. When Publius Cornelius Scipio, the Roman commander of the Spanish expedition, landed to take on supplies on the coast of Gaul, he was shocked to discover that Hannibal had already departed Spain with an army of 30,000 men (and 60 famous elephants), crossed Gaul, and was heading over the Alps into northern Italy. Scipio sent his soldiers on to Spain while he hastily returned to Italy to patch together another army, but the ease with which Hannibal routed him gave the Romans their first hint at the danger they faced. Hannibal won every major battle the Romans risked giving him (except the last). He devastated Italy and slaughtered its men. But Rome refused to admit defeat, and the war dragged on for 14 years. Hannibal had made a serious miscalculation. He had expected Rome’s Italian allies to defect and join him, but most remained loyal to Rome. If Italy’s cities were subjects of a Roman Empire, they were not eager to seize the chance Hannibal gave them to escape their subjugation.

Rome finally defeated Hannibal by refusing to fight him in Italy while opening new fronts against the Carthaginians elsewhere. One Roman army dogged Hannibal’s tracks in Italy and harassed his rearguard. Another overwhelmed his bases in Spain and his allies in Sicily, and a third finally took the war to North Africa. In 204 B.C.E. Hannibal was forced to pull his men out of Italy and take them home to defend Carthage. He fended off the Romans for two more years, but he was finally defeated by Scipio “Africanus,” the son of the Scipio who had tried (and failed) to stop him when he first entered Italy. Carthage surrendered, and Hannibal fled to the Middle East, where ultimately he committed suicide to avoid capture by Rome’s agents.

Carthage was allowed to survive—stripped of most of its territory and ships, and burdened with a huge war indemnity. Rome annexed Spain but ceded much of North Africa to Numidia, its ally in the war with Hannibal. The western Mediterranean was now indisputably Roman territory, but only portions of it were directly administered by Rome (which still had no plan for organizing an empire).

The Second Punic War had exhausted the Romans, but they leaped immediately into new campaigns in Greece. In 215 B.C.E. Philip V of Macedon (r. 221–179 B.C.E.) had allied with Hannibal because he was afraid that Rome might use its naval bases at the mouth of the Adriatic to invade his realm. A war with his Greek neighbors prevented him from sending help to Hannibal, but that made no difference to Rome. Rome declared war on Philip in 200 B.C.E., and three years later he surrendered. Curiously, Rome annexed no territory but contented itself with liberating the Greek city-states from Macedonian control. So long as the Greeks were disunited and fighting among themselves, they posed no threat to Rome.

When a warring Greek faction invited the Seleucid emperor, Antiochus III (r. 223–187 B.C.E.), to come to its aid, Rome sent its armies back to Greece. Antiochus beat a hasty retreat. The Romans pursued him across the Aegean, and in 188 B.C.E., he

---

**Question:** Does the map support Rome’s belief that Carthage was a threat to its security?
yielded most of Asia Minor to Rome. Rome fought two more wars with Macedonia and the Greeks, and in 168 B.C.E. it tried to pacify Greece by taking a thousand prominent Greeks hostage (the historian Polybius among them). In 148 B.C.E. Rome finally turned Macedonia into a province, and in 146 B.C.E. Rome sacked the city of Corinth and put down the last of the Greek rebellions. In the same year, a Third Punic War (149–146 B.C.E.) ended with the obliteration of Carthage. Rome emerged as the dominant power in the Mediterranean world, but its imperial territory did not yet have an imperial government.

The Stress of Success  Rome’s republican institutions were barely adequate for a city-state, and they were certainly not designed for the responsibilities of a vast empire. The new lands that Rome had acquired altered life for both the rich and the poor in ways that did neither class much good. Lax oversight of the provinces meant that most of the profits from the empire went into the pockets of military governors who used them to corrupt republican politics. The custom developed of giving a Roman magistrate a provincial command at the end of his year-long term in office. This prevented him from scheming to stay in power by getting him out of the city. But it also gave him a chance to recoup his finances and return to Rome with enough money to run for another office that would bring him another governorship. Because it was virtually impossible for an outsider to break into this system, about 50 families appropriated much of the empire’s wealth and monopolized the republic’s offices.

As the few rich grew richer, the empire’s new provinces impoverished many of the soldiers who had conquered them. The Hannibal War devastated Italy’s farms, and long terms of military service prevented many men from caring for their land. When Rome’s farmer-soldiers finally returned home, many lacked the capital to rebuild their farms and those who had the money found that the kind of farming they could do was no longer profitable. Grain was the small farmer’s cash crop, but the Italian market was flooded with cheap grain from the provinces. Small domestic producers could not compete and had to sell out to wealthy investors who could afford to convert the land to more profitable uses. Rich families consolidated huge blocks of land and created latifundia, plantations that produced commercial crops (such as olives, wine, and cattle) for the international market. These latifundia provided no employment for the Roman farmer whose land they absorbed, for Rome’s wars created an excess of cheap slaves. As slaves took over much of the agricultural work, rural freemen had little choice but to flood into cities like Rome. The government distributed bread to keep them quiet, and they earned handouts by joining the armies of clients with whom the great families fought their political battles.

The situation was so corrupt that by the middle of the second century B.C.E. even wealthy Romans feared that the republic might collapse. There were calls for reform, but two things made changing the system difficult. No one was sure what would work, and no one wanted anyone else to get credit for a program that did work. Matters came to a head in 133 B.C.E., when Tiberius Gracchus (163–133 B.C.E.), a tribune, proposed confiscating the excess from anyone who had appropriated more than 320 acres of what was designated as public land, dividing the surplus into small farms, and giving these to the poor. The office of tribune had been created to protect the plebeians, and each tribune had the power to block legislation that he thought was not in the people’s interest by standing up in the assembly and saying veto (“I forbid!”). When Tiberius presented his land redistribution proposal, its opponents induced another tribune to cast a veto. Tiberius, however, was prepared for this. He persuaded the assembly to throw the man out of office—on the theory that he had not used his powers for the purpose for which they had been granted. Land reform passed, but at the cost of destroying one of the crucial checks and balances of the Roman constitution. If the mob could instantly depose any politician who displeased it, the republic would degenerate into mob rule. When Tiberius’s opponents finally ran out of legal ways to counter his maneuvers, they simply murdered him.

Tiberius’s land redistribution plan was implemented, but it failed. Like many reforms, it addressed the symptom of a problem while ignoring its causes. It did nothing to change the situation that had forced small farmers off their land in the first place. Returning them to the land only set them up to fail again.

The strategy Tiberius invented to pass his reform program had a greater impact on the republic than did the reform itself, for it caused a new division in Roman politics. The populares (“people’s party”) sought power, as Tiberius had, by championing ideas that appealed to the mob. The optimates (“aristocrats”) defended the prerogatives of the Senate by affirming Rome’s conservative traditions. Neither party had a platform of proposals designed to cure the ills of Roman society. Each was defined by the method it used for gaining political advantage.

In 123 B.C.E. Tiberius Gracchus’s younger brother, Gaius (159–121 B.C.E.), took up the populares’ cause and made considerable headway until the optimates again employed force to destroy a rival politician. Rome’s next leader, Gaius Marius (157–86 B.C.E.), learned a lesson from the fate of the two Gracchi that profoundly affected the course of Roman history. He concluded that to survive in the Roman political arena, a man had to have an army at his back.

In 107 B.C.E. Marius won a consulship by promising to bring a war with Numidia to a speedy conclusion. He proposed beefing up the army by dropping the traditional property qualification for service. This was welcomed by the impoverished Roman masses who had no jobs and no prospects, for it gave them a chance to vote themselves military careers. The soldiers Marius created in this way were, however, more his than Rome’s. To secure their own continued employment, they were determined to keep him in office. Marius’s reform turned Rome’s army into a political machine that, contrary to tradition, won one consulship after another for its general.

Rome’s Civil War  No one could compete with a man like Marius without building an army comparable to his, so every Roman politician who hoped to stay in the game set about winning a military command. That meant that aspiring politicians needed wars, for armies were
PEOPLE IN CONTEXT Cornelia, Mother of the Gracchi

In theory Roman women, like Greek women, were subject to male authority, but in practice they had much more freedom. Roman girls could attend school, and Roman women were not confined to their homes. They followed politics and sometimes demonstrated in the streets to push for legislation they wanted. Women from prominent families were well-known public figures who exercised considerable influence. The most respected of these from the republican era was the Gracchi brothers’ mother, Cornelia.

Roman women bore only one name, the feminine spelling of their father’s gens. (All of a man’s daughters had the same name.) Cornelia (c. 180–105 B.C.E.) was the daughter of Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus, the victor in the Second Punic War. The husband to whom Scipio gave her (at age 12) was a distinguished Roman considerably her senior, Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus. The marriage was fruitful. Cornelia bore him 12 children, alternating boys and girls. Only three survived to adulthood: Tiberius, Gaius, and their sister Sempronia (who married a Scipio to reaffirm the links between her parental families).

After her husband’s death in 154 B.C.E., Cornelia chose to remain a widow and declined a proposal of marriage from the pharaoh of Egypt. She devoted herself to the education of her sons and was said to have fired their political ambitions by telling them that she was ashamed to be known as Scipio’s daughter rather than the Gracchi’s mother. Given their bloody fates, she may have come to regret her words. Ancient historians cited letters (the authenticity of which modern scholars doubt) that she wrote to Gaius, urging him to moderate his radical politics. She was so well known and admired that her sons could score points with their audiences simply by mentioning her in their speeches, and her popularity was such that she became the first Roman woman, other than a priestess, to whom the republic erected a statue. The bronze effigy has disappeared, but its inscribed base survives. We know what it looked like, for statues honoring other women took it as their model. It is hard to imagine such a monument being raised in Athens, where, according to Pericles, the best women were those who were totally invisible.

Question: What explains the fact that women were more liberated in the Roman republic than in the Athenian democracy?
sweep pirates from the Mediterranean. This warranted a massive army and navy, which Pompey used not only to suppress piracy but to extend the empire in the east to the borders of Egypt. The Senate ultimately awoke to the possibility that it had created another Sulla, and the only strategy it could think of to block him was to make more like him. The Senators decreed special commands for Crassus (115–53 B.C.E.), reputedly Rome’s richest man, and an ambitious and talented blue blood named Julius Caesar (100–44 B.C.E.).

When Pompey returned from the east in 62 B.C.E., he surprised everyone by leaving his army behind. He was a conservative man who would have been content simply to be showered with lavish praise for his services to the republic. The Senators chose instead to try to bring him down. They delayed the grants of land he requested as retirement pay for his veteran soldiers in an attempt to undermine his troops’ loyalty to him. The Senators also concluded, somewhat prematurely, that they could handle Pompey on their own and that they had no further need for Crassus and Caesar. This had the effect of forcing Pompey, Crassus, and Caesar to bury their differences and join forces to defeat the Senate. In 59 B.C.E. they formed an alliance called the First Triumvirate (“rule by three men”).

The First Triumvirate Together, Pompey, Crassus, and Caesar were invincible, but they had no common objective for the use of their power. Each man had a private agenda that reflected his suspicion of his allies. Because Pompey’s army made him the dominant member of the triumvirate, Crassus and Caesar wanted assignments that would enable them to build up comparable forces. Crassus set out to conquer the Parthian Empire, a great Iranian state on the eastern edge of Rome’s territory, and Caesar stirred up trouble with the Gauls in northern Europe. Caesar pushed Rome’s frontier to the Rhine River and the English Channel and whipped up enthusiasm in Rome by publishing an account of his campaigns (The Gallic Wars). Pompey, who stayed in Rome, was distrustful of both his colleagues, and the Triumvirate unraveled after the Parthians killed Crassus in 53 B.C.E. The Senate concluded that Pompey, an optimus, was a lesser threat to its interests than Caesar, a popularis, and it joined with Pompey in an attempt to end Caesar’s career.

The situation came to a head in 50 B.C.E. Caesar’s term as governor of his provinces expired, and the Senate refused to extend his command of his army. Caesar then marched on Rome and Pompey, and many of the Senators fled to Greece where large numbers of Pompey’s troops were quartered. Although Caesar’s army was much smaller and short of supplies, it went in pursuit, and in June, 48 B.C.E., Caesar routed the Senatorial forces at the battle of Pharsalus. Remnants of Pompey’s army scattered to Africa and Spain, and Pompey sought refuge in Egypt, the only Mediterranean state still outside Rome’s empire. Fearing Caesar’s retribution, the Egyptians killed Pompey, embalmed his head, and sent it to Caesar as a token of their friendship. Caesar then invaded Egypt to avenge Pompey’s murder. Egypt owed its survival as an independent country to the skill with which its young queen, Cleopatra VII (69–30 B.C.E.), a descendant of Alexander’s general Ptolemy, handled Caesar.

Cleopatra In the popular imagination Queen Cleopatra VII of Egypt, mistress to both Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, has become a seductress whose beauty men found irresistible. However, the most reliable of her portraits suggest that she was not remarkably handsome. The formalized example shown here was probably executed during her lifetime. The legend of her beauty may in large part be a product of misogyny—of the assumption that a woman’s only power and appeal derive from her sexuality.

It took some time for Caesar to clean out pockets of resistance, but by 45 B.C.E. he was master of Rome. Caesar was a good historian, and he probably concluded from his study of recent events that a republic could not govern an empire. Rome’s urban mob had neither the wisdom nor the right to rule the world, and there was no way (given the primitive means of communications that were available) to enfranchise all the free men of the empire. Because monarchy was the only form of government efficient enough to run a large state in the ancient era, Caesar probably planned to establish kingship of some kind. That, at least, is what the Senate suspected, and to prevent it, some 60 Senators mobbed him at a meeting on March 15, 44 B.C.E. (the ides of March), and stabbed him 23 times.

Brutus and Cassius, the plot’s leaders, had no plan to replace Caesar. They saw themselves as reformers who were defending the republic, and like previous reformers, they mistook a symptom for a cause. They assumed that Caesar was the problem and that when he was removed, the republic would automatically thrive. It was the republic’s inadequacy, however, that had brought Caesar to power. His death did not correct that. It simply created a vacuum to be filled by a new Caesar.

The man best poised to succeed Caesar was his popular second-in-command, Mark Antony (c. 83–30 B.C.E.). Antony’s plan was to stage a showy funeral for Caesar and distract Caesar’s men until their desire to avenge themselves on the Senators abated. If they remained under his control, the Senate would be forced to rely on him for protection and he would be Rome’s master. The problem with Antony’s strategy was that Caesar had an heir. Caesar had no son, but he had adopted a nephew, Octavian (63 B.C.E.–14 C.E.), to carry on his name. Octavian was only 18 when Caesar died, and he had little military or political experience. But when he charged into Rome demanding vengeance for the murder of his “father,” Caesar’s soldiers cheered. The Senate was perversely delighted. Even though Octavian was vowing to punish the
senatorial assassins, the Senate granted him a military command. It assumed that he was too young to be a threat and that his mere existence would divide Caesar’s men and set them to fighting among themselves. Octavian was too smart for that. As soon as he had something to offer, he joined forces with Antony and Lepidus (d. 13 B.C.E.), another of Caesar’s officers. They formally established the Second Triumvirate, a legal joint dictatorship, and in 42 B.C.E. they defeated the armies of Brutus and Cassius at Philippi in Greece.

**The Second Triumvirate**  The triumvirs had assumed dictatorial powers allegedly to restore the republic, but they were in no hurry. After Philippi, they divided up responsibilities for governing the empire. Antony’s military reputation made him the dominant member of the triumvirate, and he awarded himself the best assignment. He headed east to prepare an invasion of Parthia. A successful Parthian campaign would provide him with a huge army with which he hoped in the end to sweep the other triumvirs aside. Octavian remained in Italy and oversaw efforts to track down rebel armies led by Pompey’s sons. Lepidus governed Africa until 36 B.C.E., when Octavian placed him under house arrest (which continued until Lepidus’s death 24 years later).

Octavian was a poor general but a superb politician, and when Antony committed a public relations blunder, Octavian moved in for the kill. Like Julius Caesar before him, Antony struck up a relationship with Egypt’s Cleopatra. It was personal. (He fathered three of her children.) But it was also a sensible strategic alliance between two level-headed rulers. Antony needed Egypt’s support for his invasion of Parthia, and Cleopatra extracted a promise of land in exchange for her aid. Octavian, however, convinced the Romans that the unpopular eastern queen had used her sexual wiles to captivate Antony—as she had previously captivated Caesar—and that Antony had become her pawn and the instrument through which she intended to rule Rome.

Octavian’s charges would have had little effect if Antony’s attack on Parthia had succeeded. But when it failed, Octavian made his move. In 32 B.C.E. he persuaded the Italians to swear a personal oath of loyalty to him and to support him in attacking Antony—allegedly to save the Roman Republic from overthrow by Cleopatra. The opposing armies again met in Greece, but they had little enthusiasm for the fight. The issue was decided by a sea battle off the western coast of Greece at Actium (31 B.C.E.). Antony and Cleopatra retreated to Egypt where they committed suicide rather than submit to Octavian.

Octavian’s victory confronted him with the challenge that had cost Caesar his life—the responsibility for creating a stable government for Rome’s empire. Octavian had already publicly eliminated the option of monarchy, for he had risen to power by promising to restore the republic. His ingenious strategy for reconciling what Rome wanted with what Rome needed was to create an “invisible monarchy,” an imperial administration masked by a republican façade. By allowing the Romans to indulge the illusion of living in a republic, he was able to subject them to a monarchy. Sometimes governments increase their power by seeming to repudiate the very things that they are doing. Citizens of modern republics and democracies need to keep that in mind.
KEY QUESTION | Revisited

Imperialism and monarchy have largely fallen out of fashion in the modern West, and Americans generally view some form of government by the people as the only reliable guarantor of what they hold to be God-given, inalienable freedoms. Americans have, from time to time, felt that it is the obligation of their country to defend democracy and spread it around the globe.

Government by the people may, however, not always be a people's highest priority. A potential conflict can arise between two things that citizens want from government: they want protection for individual liberties, but they also want security for person and property. If circumstances force them to choose between these things, history suggests that the desire for safety often wins out. The Greeks' experiment with democracy led to an era of civil war and chaos that ended in foreign occupation. The Romans repeatedly tinkered with their republic in an effort to make it work, but in the end they sacrificed the reality of government by the people for its illusion. For many Romans the price must have seemed worth paying. The imperial administration that took over from Rome's quarrelsome republic unified Europe, North Africa, and much of the Middle East and maintained something like world peace for over three centuries.

An autocracy can provide a more efficient response to a crisis than a government that depends on numerous people reaching consensus about what to do. Given that efficiency can mean the difference between life and death in wartime, people may willingly sacrifice liberties to achieve it. Consequently, wars—particularly long ones—are dangerous for democracies. The struggle for victory usually drives them to increase the power and reduce the number of their leaders.

The size of a state has also often been a factor in determining the success or failure of a citizen-run government. Consensus is usually easier to reach in small communities than large ones, and citizens of small communities develop emotional bonds that sometimes inspire them to remarkable acts of self-sacrifice in defense of their homeland. Such was the experience of Athens in the Persian Wars, as well as the behavior of the Romans in the early days of their republic. In the ancient world, however, when the scale of social life grew beyond a certain point, government by the people tended to falter and to allow autocracy to take its place. Given the limited means of communication then available, an autocratic hierarchy provided the only efficient way to govern a large area. Orders could quickly be sent down from the top, but it was difficult for opinions to be gathered up from the bottom. In this respect the modern world is different. It is often said that communications technologies have shrunk the world and made it the equivalent of a global village. If so, can great territorial states now be successfully and permanently governed by the masses, or are governments by the people still fated, when pressured by war and conflict, to surrender to small coteries of powerful leaders?

Review Questions

1. What were Alexander's strategies for conquering an empire and for making that conquest permanent?
2. What do the arts, sciences, literatures, and philosophies of the Hellenistic empires imply about the sociopolitical environments these empires created?
3. Why did the discoveries and inventions of Hellenistic scientists have so little impact on their world?
4. How did Rome's republican system of government differ from Athens' democracy?
5. Did Rome intentionally build an empire, or was its empire an unintended consequence of its attempts to defend itself?
6. Why was the Roman Republic unable to manage its empire?

Please consult the Suggested Readings at the back of the book to continue your study of the material covered in this chapter. For a list of documents on the Primary Source DVD-ROM that relate to topics in this chapter, please refer to the back of the book.