Rome’s Empire and the Unification of the Western World

KEY Question
Do people prefer order to liberty?

In 1937 a skillful feat of engineering recovered fragments of the Altar of Peace (Ara Pacis), a first-century monument that lay buried beneath a sixteenth-century Roman palazzo. It had been erected about 9 B.C.E. to commemorate the pax Romana (“Roman peace”) that descended on the Mediterranean world after Octavian’s victory over Antony and Cleopatra. The altar stood on a platform open to the sky, and it was surrounded by a wall on which carvings depicted Octavian (63 B.C.E.–14 C.E.) and his family in a religious procession. Its style so brilliantly synthesized Greek idealism and Roman realism that it inspired artists for centuries.

Near the end of his life, Octavian published a testament cataloguing his services to Rome. In addition to bringing peace, he noted that he had used his personal fortune to see the state through fiscal crises. He had rebuilt the city of Rome and entertained its residents with races and games. He had provided free food during famines. He had reduced the size of the army while expanding the empire, securing its frontiers, and maintaining its internal order. But the achievement of which he said he was most proud was the restoration of Rome’s republican government.

—Tacitus
In truth, Octavian had not restored the republic. He had used republican rhetoric to engineer Rome’s transition to monarchy. At the time, few objected, for it seemed safe to trust him with overwhelming power. Few thought about what might happen when that power passed to others. Within a few years, the historian Tacitus (c. 55–120 C.E.) and other members of the senatorial class were so disillusioned that they even denounced the peace the emperors created for Rome. It was purchased, they said, at the cost of the republican liberties that they had long enjoyed (and abused). Tacitus claimed that the victim sacrificed on Octavian’s Altar of Peace was freedom.

Just societies aspire to reconcile the freedom of the individual with the desires of the group for security and stability. This is difficult. Too much freedom leads to chaos, and too much control to tyranny—and fear of one may bring on the other. Octavian rescued Rome from a century-long civil war and established a peace that brought undeniable benefits. There was, however, a cost. As you examine the history of imperial Rome, reflect on what it implies about the problem of balancing liberty against the risk of anarchy.

The Augustan Era

The Roman Republic was able to conquer an empire, but not to rule one. The republic’s strategy for heading off tyranny was to divide power among its magistrates. This risked disorder, for men often yielded to the temptation to use the resources of their offices to fight among themselves for supremacy. A monarchy, which set one man far above all others, promised more stability, but the Romans equated monarchy with liberty. Octavian’s strategy for heading off tyranny was to divide power among its magistrates. This risked disorder, for men often yielded to the temptation to use the resources of their offices to fight among themselves for supremacy. A monarchy, which set one man far above all others, promised more stability, but the Romans equated monarchy with liberty. By skillfully combining and prolonging these, he exercised mastery over Rome. His example suggests that the greatest danger to a modern republic with separated branches of government may not be an overt attack on its constitution, but a covert strategy that quietly and effectively consolidates power for one man.

An Invisible Monarchy

When Octavian returned to Rome from his eastern campaigns in 29 B.C.E., he was hailed as the savior of his country. He knew that its salvation would be short-lived unless fundamental changes were made in its political institutions, but he was acutely aware of the danger of making any changes that might be interpreted as threats to the republic. Suspicious of monarchial ambitions had cost Julius Caesar and Mark Antony their lives.

Rome’s immediate need for a leader strong enough to restore order bought Octavian a period of grace. For eight years, he provided a legal basis for his authority by monopolizing one of the consulships, but this was risky. It looked suspiciously like a step toward monarchy. In January, 27 B.C.E., he secured his position by threatening to give it up. He convened the Senate and offered to surrender all his powers and fully restore the republic. There was no risk that the Senate would accept his offer. The Senators realized that things would fall apart if he loosed the reins of power. So instead, they thanked him for his services to the republic by granting him a title—Augustus (“majestic”)—and prevailed on him to continue as consul and accept a ten-year term as governor of 18 of the empire’s 28 provinces. The army had been split up and posted to trouble spots in the provinces, most of which, coincidentally, were the ones assigned to Octavian.

As the holder of imperium maius (“supreme military authority”), the new Augustus was Rome’s imperator (“emperor”). This was an ancient republican term for a victorious general, not a monarch, but Augustus preferred to use a civilian title that the grateful Romans had lavished on him to recognize his record of public service: princeps civitatis (“first of citizens”). All of Augustus’s titles were republican in origin, but they, like his adopted family name, Caesar (the origin of Kaiser and Tsar), soon came to signify regal authority.

Augustus believed that the Romans would tolerate a princeps (a government in which one man had the power to keep things on track) if it brought the blessings of peace and if its prince honored their republican traditions. He scrupulously avoided anything that looked monarchical. His home on the Palatine Hill was a typical upper-class residence. (Parts of it have survived.) He wore ordinary civilian dress, and he claimed that his toga (the garments that symbolized Roman citizenship) were homemade by his wife, Livia, and daughter, Julia. He did not surround himself with armed men or throw his weight around needlessly. He wandered the streets, entered into the fray of elections, solicited votes for candidates he backed, took part in debates, and treated his senatorial colleagues as equals.

Augustus’s stated affection for republican tradition was not entirely sincere. He shared as much power as he thought he safely could with the Senate and the republican magistrates. He reduced the Senate from 1,000 to about 600 members and filled its ranks with experienced men of good reputation. His preference was for members of Rome’s old families, but the civil war had taken a toll on these. They were dying out and a new aristocracy with roots in other Italian cities and the provinces was in the making. The reconstituted Senate had real responsibility. It managed the treasury, served as a kind of supreme court, and had the power to legislate. Augustus assembled a small company of trusted Senators and magistrates to serve as his personal advisors, and during his sometimes lengthy absences from Italy, the Senate was left to manage (or mismanage) on its own.

In 23 B.C.E. Augustus increased his republican cover by resigning the office of consul. His successive terms were unpopular, for they violated tradition and kept other men from enjoying the prestige of the office. Thereafter, he bas ed his authority on his privileges as an honorary tribune and the periodic renewal of his provincial governorships. From time to time, he also held the office of censor, which allowed him to create Senators and “equestrians” (Rome’s second highest social class), and he served as Pontifex maximus, the head of the state religion. Throughout his career he was careful to make sure that his powers derived from republican offices or precedents. By skillfully combining and prolonging these, he exercised mastery over Rome. His example suggests that the greatest danger to a modern republic with separated branches of government may not be an overt attack on its constitution, but a covert strategy that quietly and behind the scenes amasses privileges and bits of authority.

Octavian Augustus

Octavian Augustus, unlike Julius Caesar, was not a soldier or talented general. His skills were political, and he was a master of propaganda. He claimed that his goal was the restoration of the Roman Republic, and he carefully avoided any of the trappings of monarchy. This statue depicts him as a good republican citizen. He wears the toga Roman men donned on formal occasions. He has no crown or jewelry, and he carries nothing more threatening than a scroll.
Reorganization  The republican cloak that shrouded Augustus’s monarchy rendered it officially “invisible,” and this allowed his fellow Romans to submit to it without sacrificing pride or patriotism. Even those who understood what was happening were inclined to play along with Augustus. The benefits of his administration were obvious but alternatives to it were not. On several occasions the Senate and the people of Rome begged him to take charge and see the state through an economic or political crisis.

The Augustan peace owed a great deal to Augustus’s military reforms. Since the days of Marius, Rome’s politicians had repeatedly involved its armies in their power struggles, and the empire’s military had grown to immense size. At each stage in the civil war, the victor had added his defeated opponents’ legions to his own. The army of which Augustus took command after Antony’s fall was more than twice as large as the one that he estimated Rome could afford, and he was eager to shrink it for other than fiscal reasons. A smaller army meant fewer threats from fewer generals. Augustus appropriated Egypt as his personal domain and used its wealth to retire about 300,000 men. This reduced the standing army from 60 to 28 legions.

Augustus limited the legionnaires’ opportunities to intervene in Rome’s politics by posting them to camps along the frontiers. An elite troop of about 4,500 men, the Praetorian Guard, was created to maintain order in Italy. Its name derived from a term for the loyal soldiers who guarded the tents (praetorii) of republican generals. In later years, the Praetorian Guard’s proximity to the city of Rome tempted it to intervene in the empire’s politics, but Augustus hoped that by professionalizing military service he could eliminate some of the motives that previously had politicized Rome’s armies. Legionnaires signed on for tours of duty lasting from 16 to 20 years. They were paid according to a fixed scale and could earn promotion from the ranks to the officer corps (although the higher commands were reserved for men from the Senatorial and equestrian classes). In short, Rome’s defenders became state employees and no longer were dependent on their generals for their pay and retirement benefits.

Augustus’s military reforms helped to consolidate, as well as pacify, the empire. His 28 legions enrolled about 160,000 men—just barely enough to maintain Rome’s 4,000-mile-long frontier. To back up the legions (membership in which was limited to Roman citizens), Augustus created auxiliaries, companies of men recruited from the provinces. The legions and auxiliaries together provided about a quarter of a million men to protect and police a population of about 100 million. Auxiliaries were less well paid than legionnaires, but a term of honorable service earned citizenship for the veteran of an auxiliary unit and qualified his sons to join the legions. The army thus provided entry into Roman society for provincials.

Cities were central to the administration of the empire, for its primitive systems of communications meant that most government had to be local government. The army literally built Rome’s famous network of roads to facilitate its movements. Augustus began to extend the roads beyond Italy to the headquarters he established for the legions in the provinces. Many of these new military camps became permanent cities that assumed responsibility for administering the districts in which they were located, and they helped to spread Latin language and culture—particularly in the west. The eastern half of the empire already had many cities, but much of the west (particularly in Spain, North Africa, and trans-Alpine Europe) was still rural territory divided among tribes. Augustus sponsored about 100 colonies, many of which were settled by his veterans. Part of a soldier’s pay was banked for him so that when he retired at about the age of 40 he had a nest egg with which to begin a new career. Many men invested in farms and businesses in the provinces in which they had served.

The Roman Empire became a kind of federation of city-states. Each of its urban centers operated within parameters set by the central administration, but each also accommodated local customs. The schools that towns supported and the opportunities for political participation they provided helped to Romanize the provincial elites and foster their loyalty to the empire. As these elites learned Latin and Greek, the empire’s upper classes acquired a common culture. The cities in which they lived were similar, no matter where they were located. Each had temples, arenas, theaters, schools, monuments, baths, and public buildings, many of which Augustus and his successors funded. Each had its councils of local leaders. Romanization spread widely, but in many places classical civilization was only a thin veneer over native cultures that outlasted the empire.

Augustus turned the republican hodgepodge of territories into a coherent empire. He redraw the boundaries of provinces and standardized their governments. He reduced corruption by establishing fixed rates of taxation and by appointing state officials, rather than private contractors, to collect and audit taxes. He waged campaigns to extend the empire to what he believed were defensible frontiers. In the east he set up a string of client kingdoms dependent on Rome. In the west he suppressed resistance in Spain and the Alpine region and extended Roman territory in the Balkans north to the Danube Valley. He planned to cross the Rhine and conquer more of Germany, but he failed in his attempt. In 9 C.E. the Germans ambushed and exterminated three legions. Augustus recovered enough to hold the line and maintain order, but the historian Tacitus grumbled about the emperor’s heavy-handed methods. The peace in some provinces, Tacitus said, was only the quiet of a man-made desert (see Map 6–1). Augustus’s administrative reforms also helped to turn Rome’s diverse holdings into a true empire. The republic had largely been run by amateurs who improvised ad hoc policies to govern its provinces. But Augustus created an imperial bureaucracy of salaried, specially trained professionals to manage the empire. Wealthy Romans often relied on well-educated freedmen and slaves to run their plantations and political offices, and Augustus followed a similar practice when staffing the administration of the empire. Service in the government gave some men, who were legally or socially handicapped, considerable power over people who were otherwise their superiors. Senators and equestrians were enlisted to oversee a growing list of government services. They supervised grain and water supplies, police forces, courts, treasuries, public entertainments, and construction projects.

Moral Regeneration  Augustus, like many Romans, believed that Italy had been able to build the empire because of the unique strength and virtues of its people—their Romanitas. It was vitally important, therefore, to preserve Italy’s traditions and cultural dominance. This was not a new idea. The Roman Senate had from time to time sought
to limit the spread of eastern religions that it viewed as detrimental to Roman character, and Italy had supported Augustus in his fight with Mark Antony because Mark Antony was seen as having succumbed to evil eastern influences.

To guarantee Italy's supremacy and the continued integrity of Roman culture, Augustus believed he needed a large pool of disciplined, patriotic upper-class Romans from which to recruit a staff for governing the empire. The civil war had devastated the citizen population, and Rome's upper classes preserved their fortunes by limiting the number of their offspring. Augustus tried to solve the manpower problem by passing laws aimed at strengthening families, increasing birthrates, and restoring commitment to traditional values. He financially penalized women below the age of 50 and men younger than 60 who failed to marry early and remarry promptly when widowed or divorced. Bachelors and sterile couples were heavily taxed, and families with three or more children were given honors and preferential treatment by the government. Adultery for women and for men who had affairs with married women became a crime against the state, punishable by fine, exile, or death. Temples were restored and archaic patriotic ceremonies revived as part of a program to promote patriotism and civic virtue.

Augustus's social legislation was a failure. He and his family even failed to set a good example for others. He sired only one child, a daughter named Julia, and her flagrant immorality ultimately drove him to exile her to a remote island.

**Latin High Culture** The arts played a part in Augustus's program for the moral and patriotic regeneration of his fellow citizens, and Roman literature reached the pinnacle of its development during his reign. Ironically, given Rome's condemnation of eastern influences, Romans did not produce much in the way of art, literature, or serious thought until they were stimulated by contact with the Greeks during the last century of the republican era. As Rome's armies moved east, Rome was flooded with looted objects and trade goods that Italian craftsmen eagerly imitated. Much classical Greek statuary survives today only in Roman copies. Influential upper-class Romans, such as the Scipios who led the city during the First and Second Punic War, were infatuated with all things Greek. They learned Greek, dressed as Greeks, bought Greek furniture and slaves, and sat at the feet of Greek philosophers. Some Roman intellectuals and politicians insisted that Greeks were effeminate, untrustworthy, and otherwise lacking in the stalwart virtues of Romanitas, but Rome thoroughly succumbed to the blandishments of Hellenistic civilization.

Romans followed the Greeks more closely in some fields than in others. They also adapted what they copied and made some original contributions of their own. This is most evident in architecture. The Romans shared the classical taste for symmetrical designs, but their buildings were often larger and more complex than those of the Greeks. They added curves—arches and domes—to the linear elements (columns and lintels) characteristic of Hellenic buildings. They invented concrete and used it to construct new kinds of imposing but graceful structures. Sulla built Rome's first major building (a temple) in the Greek style. Pompey and Caesar added a few more, but when Augustus came to power, his empire's capital still had few notable buildings. He set about changing that—claiming in the end that he found Rome a city of brick and left it a city of marble.

Related to architecture was the Romans' unique gift for engineering. They drove arrow-straight roads across rough terrain, tunneled through mountains, and created immense systems of aqueducts to supply their cities with lavish amounts of water. Over 200,000 gallons a day eventually flowed into Rome to supply its fountains and baths. A leisurely daily bath was an indispensable ritual of civilized life for a Roman, and Roman cities were equipped with luxurious public bathing facilities.

Latin literature was pioneered by comic playwrights. Twenty-one plays by Plautus (c. 254–184 B.C.E.), an Italian, and six by his successor, a former Carthaginian slave named Terence (c. 195–159 B.C.E.), have survived. Both men imitated Greek models, but Terence's work was the more refined. Plautus served a Roman appetite for farce and slapstick, as serious playwrights with literary pretensions were not much in demand.

The authors of the early republican period were handicapped by the immaturity of the Latin language. The first Romans to try their hands at prose writing wrote in Greek. Cato the Elder (234–149 B.C.E.), a Senator remembered primarily for his political activities, attempted a history of Rome in Latin. It has been lost, but a book he wrote on agriculture survives to provide us with our earliest extended specimen of Latin prose.
Latin poetry began to flourish in the middle of the first century B.C.E. as Romans became acquainted with the work of Greeks associated with Alexandria's Museum. Among the best and earliest extant examples are the poems that Catullus (c. 85–54 B.C.E.) penned to describe his passionate, stormy, and disillusioning affair with the promiscuous wife of a prominent Roman politician. Lucretius (c. 94–55 B.C.E.), the republican era's other major poet, chose a more serious theme for his work. He wrote to convince his countrymen that Epicurean materialism provided escape from the stress and anxiety of the wars that plagued his generation. He claimed that the universe was nothing more than bits of matter randomly colliding in empty space and that when people came to understand this, they would lose their fear of death and the gods and begin to behave rationally. Reason would persuade them of the wisdom of avoiding strong feelings—the pleasurable as well as the painful—by distancing themselves emotionally from a world that was essentially random and meaningless.

At about the same time when Romans were discovering Greek poets, they were introduced to Greek philosophy. In 155 B.C.E. Athens dispatched a number of its prominent teachers to Rome as ambassadors. The traditional values of Roman culture disposed the Romans to reject philosophies that flirted with atheism and religions that undercut moral rigor. In 186 B.C.E. the Senate outlawed the worship of Dionysus (Bacchus), a cult associated with orgiastic excesses. In 173 B.C.E. it banished Epicurean philosophers for teaching what it regarded as self-indulgent quietism. The Greek philosophy that most appealed to the Romans was Stoicism, and Rome produced two of the best known Stoic authors: Epictetus (b. c. 50 C.E.), a Greek slave, and Marcus Aurelius (r. 161–180 C.E.), an emperor (both of whom wrote in Greek). Stoics provided a rationale for the traditional Roman virtues of duty and self-discipline. They taught that the world is a great material organism animated by a rational principle. Because it is a rational system, all of its parts serve essential purposes in the functioning of the whole. Individual freedom is, therefore, an illusion. Peace of mind comes from realizing this—from accepting the duties of one's station knowing that everyone (from emperor to slave) is on the same footing. All obey necessity. The only thing within their power is their attitude toward life, and the only real evils are the painful emotions (such as anger, frustration, disappointment, and jealousy) that are aroused when the world cannot be made to serve one's personal desires. Reason frees the virtuous individual to serve the community dispassionately and disinterestedly.

Because republican politicians had to solicit support from voters and sway the thinking of popular assemblies, they were attracted to the study of rhetoric, the art of persuasive speaking pioneered by Greek philosophers. The oratorical skills of Cicero (106–43 B.C.E.) helped him overcome the handicap of undistinguished ancestry, earn a consulship, and serve as one of the Senate's leaders during the era of the First and Second Triumvirates. Cicero was less an original thinker than a popularizer of Greek philosophy. He favored the Stoics and maintained that the infighting that plagued the republic would end if men allowed themselves to be guided by the rational laws that Stoics claimed governed nature. A rational society would grant uniquely talented people (such as Cicero) special privileges and elevate them to positions of leadership no matter what their family backgrounds. Cicero claimed that, from time to time, the republic needed a princeps, an extraordinary citizen whose natural charisma, wisdom, and moral authority equipped him to guide the Senate and the popular assemblies in discharging their respective duties. To his dismay, Cicero discovered that a princeps might not be all that rational and benevolent. He attacked Mark Antony in a series of fiery speeches, and when the Second Triumvirate came to power, Antony murdered him and exhibited his head and right hand (the orator's instruments) on the speaker's platform in the Forum.

Greeks were certainly capable of the kind of viciousness that Mark Antony displayed, but only the Romans turned slaughter into entertainment for the masses. By the Hellenistic era, most towns had arenas and theaters in which to stage public spectacles. The Greek and Roman religious calendars were replete with festivals celebrated with games. But where the Greeks had a passion for athletic competitions, the Romans loved to witness the shedding of animal and human blood.

The politicians of the Roman Republic competed for office by bribing the voters with lavish games, and this was one of the many traditions Augustus honored. When he toted up his services to Rome, they included sponsorship of 18 gladiatorial combats involving 10,000 men and 3,500 animals. Later emperors outdid him. Tens of thousands of men and beasts were offered up during holidays that sometimes continued for months. Exotic animals were imported at great expense simply to be destroyed. To find men to kill, jails were emptied of criminals, slaves purchased, and captives taken in war. Contests between odd pairings of animals (a bear versus a bull, for example) or men with different weapons were invented to prevent the slaughter from becoming routine and boring.

Some of Rome's educated elite (including a few emperors) despised the games, but they knew that it was politically unwise to insult the masses by expressing contempt for the public's entertainment. The delight Romans took in witnessing bloodshed and death might tempt a modern American to look down on them, but no Roman was ever able to relish the kind of elaborate atrocities that Hollywood simulates. Contemporary audiences excuse their appetite for mayhem by pointing out that what they spend billions of dollars to watch is not real. But if the Romans had had special effects artists at their disposal, they too might have been content with make-believe. The real question is why such spectacles appeal to anyone in any age.

Art and Augustan Propaganda The Golden Age of Latin literature dawned with Augustus's empire. The leading authors of his day helped promote his reforms, but their propagandistic works were inspired by sincere belief in his vision of Rome's strengths and his faith in its destiny. They were deeply grateful for the Augustan peace and brimming with patriotic enthusiasm. They shared Augustus's faith that cultivation of the sturdy agrarian virtues that had enabled their ancestors to win an empire would equip them to lead the world into an era of peace and plenty.

Virgil (70–19 B.C.E.) was Rome's greatest poet. His father, a northern Italian landowner, wanted him to practice law. His work, however, came to the attention of one of Augustus's close associates, a wealthy equestrian named Maecenas (c. 63–8 B.C.E.) whose patronage freed Virgil to pursue his writing. Virgil's earlier poems, Eclogues, were mostly romanticized descriptions of the Italian countryside and the simple pleasures of
The Altar of Peace The altar Augustus commissioned to express gratitude for the end of the civil war was surrounded by a wall on which a religious procession (featuring members of Augustus’s family) is depicted. It is a masterpiece both of classical sculpture and Augustan propaganda. The public ceremony it celebrates is very much an idealized family affair. The women have their heads modestly covered, the toga-clad males wear wreaths indicating honor and public service, and they have produced children who are being raised in traditions of Roman patriotism and piety.

The second major poet of Rome’s Golden Age was Horace (65–8 B.C.E.), a freedman’s son who saw military service in the civil war. Virgil recommended him to Maecenas, who gave Horace a rural estate on which to live and write. Horace worked on a smaller scale than Virgil (producing satires, odes, epistles, and hymns,) but joined Virgil in exhorting the Romans to practice the hardy, sober virtues that Augustus championed.

Augustus was less pleased with the third of the Golden Age’s great poets, Ovid (43 B.C.E.–17 C.E.). Ovid’s prolific output dealt largely with sensuous subjects that appealed to the dissolve young aristocrats whom Augustus was trying to reform. Among his works was a textbook for seducers, The Art of Love, which was especially likely to offend the princeps. Scarcely less titillating were some of the 250 or so tales he retold in Metamorphoses, a kind of encyclopedia of classical mythology. In 8 C.E. Ovid’s involvement (with Augustus’s granddaughter) in a sexual scandal led to his banishment to a remote, barbarous town on the shores of the Black Sea. His pleas for forgiveness went unanswered, and he died in exile.

The greatest prose writer of Augustus’s generation was the historian Livy (59 B.C.E.–17 C.E.), who produced a monumental survey of Roman history from the city’s founding to his own day. The 35 of its 142 books that survive constitute a uniquely source of information relating to Rome’s early development. Like the poets, Livy was an advocate for the Augustan virtues. He believed that history’s purpose was to teach moral lessons, and his history was filled with tales of Roman valor, self-control, piety, patriotism, and moral rectitude. For centuries, schoolteachers have used Livy’s inspirational stories in their struggle to turn unruly children into disciplined adults.

Order and Continuity: The Dynastic Option

Augustus avoided assassination, gave Rome over 40 years of stable government, and died in his bed at an advanced age. He knew that the empire needed someone like him to oversee it. However, because Rome was still officially a republic, it had no provision for appointing a successor to carry on his work. An invisible monarchy had to be passed on secretly. This was not hard to do, for Romans were not particular about the line that separates public from private authority.

In the testament Augustus wrote to review his life’s work, he gave an accounting of his private expenditures on behalf of Rome. On several occasions, he had distributed 400 or more sesterces to at least a quarter of a million men. During famines, he had fed Rome at his own expense. He had spent 400 million sesterces to settle veterans from the army, and he had donated 150 million sesterces to the public treasury. Given that a laborer’s daily wage was about four sesterces and that Augustus by no means impoverished his heirs, his fortune must have been staggering. By using it to fund public services, Augustus blurred the distinction between government agents and his personal servants. This created confusion between his household and the state bureaucracy that allowed the latter to pass to his heirs when they inherited the former. The easiest way to perpetuate his invisible monarchy was to make it the hereditary property of his family.

Augustus’s popularity and the length of his reign helped smooth the path for his heir. By the time he died, there were few Romans left who had experienced life under the old republic and who had painful memories of the civil war. The Romans did not want to return to the past, but they were not ready to repudiate their republican traditions and acknowledge the new political reality. This meant that they, in effect, surrendered to Augustus’s heirs, for they could not control the choice of their monarch until they admitted that they had a monarchy. Hereditary systems of succession are risky. An heir may not be qualified to handle his inheritance, or a ruler may fail to produce an heir. Augustus’s family confronted Rome with both problems.
The Julio-Claudians Augustus's only child was his daughter Julia, and his hopes for an heir were pinned on the two grandsons she gave him. When both these boys died, he had to make an arrangement that displeased all concerned. He compelled his estranged stepson Tiberius, the son of his wife Livia and her first husband (Claudius Nero), to divorce a wife he loved, marry Julia, and assume the duties of heir. Because Augustus was a Julian by adoption and Tiberius a Claudian by birth, historians refer to Rome's first imperial dynasty as the Julio-Claudians.

Augustus owed much of his success to his ability to cultivate the fantasy that he was only a first among equals in the game of republican politics. On his deathbed he reportedly asked a group of friends, "In life's farce have I acted my part well?" Tiberius (r. 14–37 C.E.) initially tried to follow Augustus's example, but Tiberius was a moody man who lacked Augustus's patience and ability to connect with people. He was soon loathed by both the masses and the Senators.

In 26 C.E. he left Rome and took up permanent residence on the island of Capri in the Bay of Naples. By now the imperial bureaucracy was so well entrenched that Rome's emperor could ignore the Senate and popular assemblies and run the empire from any location he chose. This humiliated and infuriated the Senators, whom Tiberius disliked as much as they disliked him. He characterized them as "men eager to be slaves." To be fair, Augustus had put the Senators in the difficult position of having responsibility without power, and they reasonably feared being set up to take the blame for things that were beyond their control. Having few alternatives, they took up their pens and vented their frustrations by writing histories. Modern readers need to keep in mind that the descriptions of Rome's emperors in these sources are far from objective.

If Tiberius failed at public relations, he succeeded at government. He surrounded himself with good advisors and trained specialists, paid close attention to the administration of the provinces, reduced their taxes, built roads, economized by cutting back on Rome's gladiatorial games, and racked up a huge surplus in the imperial treasury for his successor.

Tiberius's only son died in 23 C.E., and his heir was a grandnephew, Gaius Caesar. He is better known by the childhood nickname his father's soldiers gave him when he struttad about their camp in a tiny military uniform: Caligula ("Little Boots").

Caligula (r. 37–41 C.E.), who is remembered as one of Rome's worst emperors, began well. He returned to Rome, was deferential to the Senate, courted the Roman populace with games, and recalled exiles. Then something went terribly wrong. Some historians believe that a serious illness disturbed his already precariously balanced mind. He was frenetic, high strung, given to insomnia, and plagued by insecurities. Many of the outlandish stories about him that are found in hostile senatorial histories defy belief. If Caligula was mad, there may have been a logic to his insanity. His extreme behavior makes some sense if it was an attempt to force the Romans to recognize that their republic was a farce and that they had become the subjects of rulers similar to the god-kings of Egypt, Persia, and the Hellenistic East.

Caligula made the mistake of alienating those closest to him, and disaffected officers of the Praetorian Guard murdered him, his wife, and his only child (an infant daughter). The Praetorians then elevated his uncle, Claudius, to the throne.

Claudius (r. 41–54 C.E.) was a bookish man who studied with the historian Livy and wrote on subjects ranging from Etruscan history to the alphabet. He was just what the faltering empire needed. Although the strength of the imperial bureaucracy and sheer momentum had carried Rome through Caligula's years of mismanagement, inertia would not preserve order indefinitely. Rome needed a conscientious leader, and Claudius had the right qualifications. He was a well-educated workaholic who enjoyed the details of administration. He had extensive knowledge of Roman law, which he put to work in the courts. He financed new colonies and public works—the most important of which was the rebuilding of Ostia, the port (at the mouth of the Tiber River) that served the city of Rome. He authorized the campaign that added Britain, which Julius Caesar had twice invaded but never conquered, to Rome's empire.

Claudius's fourth and last wife was his niece, Agrippina The Younger. The unusual marriage was probably intended to safeguard the dynasty. Claudius was aging and ill and unlikely to live long enough to see his only son, Britannicus, reach maturity. The other possible heir to the throne was Nero, a son Agrippina had by an earlier marriage. Claudius's union with Agrippina and adoption of Nero joined the surviving branches of the imperial family and created two potential heirs. Because both boys were young, Agrippina was groomed for the role of regent. Claudius gave her the title "Augusta" and minted coins in her honor. Ancient governments used coins to communicate with the masses. As they passed from hand to hand, people absorbed the messages the government had stamped on them. By accustoming the Romans to an Augusta, Claudius prepared them, should it become necessary, for a situation they had never faced before: rule by a woman.

When Claudius died in 54 C.E., Nero (r. 54–68 C.E.), the senior heir, was 17 years old. He, like Caligula, has often been dismissed as a madman, but that may be too simplistic an interpretation of the ancient sources. On the one hand, he is accused of wanting murder of countless persons (including his half-brother, his mother, and his wife) and absurdly self-indulgent, self-deluding behavior. But on the other hand, Suetonius, an ancient Roman historian who never heard a scurrilous rumor he was not eager to repeat, claims that after Nero's death people raised statues to him in the Forum, annually decked his grave with flowers, circulated his edicts, and even claimed that he was not dead but would someday reappear to reclaim his throne.

The Roman concept of leadership was essentially military, but Nero was no soldier and was unwilling to pose as one. His strange behavior may have been an attempt to establish a new kind of authority over Rome. An imperator was a general, a warrior who led by intimidating his subjects. Nero, a poet, may have embraced the romantic idea that an artist could lead by inspiring his followers. His education convinced him that Greek civilization set the standards to which Romans should aspire. He adopted Greek dress, promoted Greek customs, and tried to persuade the Roman mob to accept Greek athletic competitions in place of Roman gladiatorial combats. The more the Romans resisted his efforts to convert their tastes, the more extreme his behavior became.

In 64 C.E. Nero proved that he was capable of governing effectively. When news reached him that a fire had destroyed 10 of Rome's 14 city districts, he hastened to Rome to supervise relief efforts. He then drew up plans for rebuilding Rome on a grander scale and issued new construction codes to make it a safer city. He also confiscated a large tract of land at
the eastern end of the Forum on which to build a new palace-garden complex, the Golden House. His enthusiasm for these projects prompted rumors that he had started the fire to clear the way for them. Fires often swept through crowded ancient cities, and Rome's fire was doubtless accidental. However, suspicion of arson fell on a band of Christians, followers of a new eastern religion that preached the imminent destruction of the world. In the midst of Rome's holocaust, some Christians had probably taken to the streets to celebrate the apparent fulfillment of their prophecies and urge last-minute conversions. Nero seized on this circumstantial evidence and made Rome's Christians scapegoats for the fire. It is important to note, however, that it was their alleged arson, not their faith, that led to their persecution and that only the small group of Christians in the city was affected. The Christian movement was not yet large enough to exert much influence on the course of Western history or attract much attention from the imperial government.

Nero's neglect of the army finally brought him down. In 68 C.E. the governor of one of the Gallic provinces organized a revolt that spread by fits and starts. Nero had no idea how to respond, and his confusion soon turned to panic. Assuming that all was lost, he ordered one of his servants to slit his throat.

**The Flavian Dynasty**  
Nero was the last of the Julio-Claudians. Rome had become dependent on an emperor, but because it had created no constitutional machinery to govern succession to its throne, it had no legal way to fill the power vacuum left by the extinction of its first dynasty. The crisis rekindled the civil war, but Rome was lucky. Three generals won and lost the city in rapid succession, and the fourth, Vespasian (r. 69–79) restored order and established a new dynasty, the Flavian.

The Julio-Claudians were aristocrats of ancient lineage, but the Flavian family had a far less exalted equestrian background. The new emperor was a 60-year-old career soldier with a lifetime of command experience acquired from postings to every corner of the empire. He was a tough, pragmatic man who spoke plainly and cracked crude jokes. The trappings of power did not seduce him into taking himself too seriously. On his deathbed he mocked the Roman custom of deifying dead emperors by quipping, "I think I'm becoming a god!"

Vespasian helped the empire recover from the colorful excesses of the Julio-Claudians. He had used his army to seize power, but he was careful not to revive the soldiers' political aspirations. He broke up dangerous concentrations of troops and transferred men frequently so that they did not put down roots and develop greater loyalties to specific regions and commanders than to the empire. Augustus had envisioned an empire run by Italians, but Vespasian (and later rulers) bridged the gap between Italy and the provinces. He encouraged Romanization of the provinces, promoted provincials to the Senate, and added them to his administration. He established a budget for his government based on a census that estimated income from taxes. He funded the construction of roads, bridges, and public buildings throughout the empire and gave Rome a new temple to Jupiter on the Capitoline hill and its famous amphitheater, the 50,000-seat Colosseum.

Vespasian's successor was his elder son Titus (r. 79–81 C.E.), whom he had groomed for the responsibilities of the imperial office. Titus was a seasoned general. At the start of his father's reign, he had put down a rebellion by Jews seeking independence for Judea. A triumphal arch at the eastern end of the Forum commemorates his victory and depicts the treasures the Romans sacked from Jerusalem's temple. Titus died before he could do much, but his reign was marked by a memorable event. In August of 79 C.E., Vesuvius, a volcano near Naples, erupted and (to the delight of generations of archaeologists and tourists) buried the towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Titus's heir was his younger brother Domitian (r. 81–96 C.E.), an arrogant autocrat. The splendid residence he built on Rome's Palatine hill gave us the word palace. He lived in constant fear that plots were being hatched against him, and his wanton executions of suspects ensured that they were. Thanks to his wife's cooperation, one of these conspiracies finally succeeded.

**Order and Continuity: The Elective Option**

Domitian had no obvious heir, and his assassins had no candidate of their own whom they wished to see succeed him. Instead, they asked the Senate—Rome's most prestigious political assembly—to legitimate what they had done by appointing a new emperor. By now there was no question of reestablishing a true republic, and the Senate knew that if it did not act to fill the throne, the army would.
PEOPLE IN CONTEXT The Imperial Aristocracy: Pliny the Elder and Pliny the Younger

The Roman Republic had belonged to the aristocratic families that monopolized its political offices, commanded its armies, confiscated its wealth, and charted its destiny. The empire diminished their power. Emperors utilized a few men of senatorial rank as advisors, provincial governors, heads of departments of state, and military officers, but they kept a close eye on them. Association with the court or a too successful military career could be dangerous for a man from a prominent family. Most of the blood shed but they kept a close eye on them. Association with the court or a too successful military
edited his letters for publicat ion. He wrote to and about many important people, among
of plotting against the throne or who simply had fortunes their ruler wanted to confis­
cate, Given the risks of exposure, wea lt hy men often preferred the security of their coun­
to Trajan, who “co uld better gu ide my ignorance.” If
by Rome’s “ba d” emperors was the blue blood of upperclass men who were suspected
took care not to write anything that might offend their emperor.

Prominent among the literary lights of the day were an uncle and a nephew, both
named Pliny. The uncle, Pliny the Elder (c . 23-79 C.E.), was a close friend of Vespasian’s, who found time in a busy military career to write poems, histories, and a huge encyclopedia of the ancient world’s scientific and pseudoscientific lore. His passion for research led to his death. He was living near Pompeii when Vesuvius erupted. The temptation to
view the mountain up close was simply too great, and he was killed by a surge of volcanic
gas. His nephew, Pliny the Younger (c. 61-113 C.E.), has left us a description of the eruption and the circumstances of his uncle’s death.

Pliny the Younger studied rhetoric with Quintillian (35-95 C.E.), the author of Rome’s leading text on the art of oratory. By the age of 18 he was representing clients in Rome’s courts. He did not follow his uncle into the military, but he held a few prestigious offices. He was briefly a consul (a largely empty honor by his day), and the emperor Trajan (r. 98-117 C.E.) appointed him governor of Bit hynia, a province on the southwestern coast of the Black Sea.

Pliny was an enthusiastic correspondent who was proud of his literary style and who edited his letters for publication. He wrote to and about many important people, among whom was his emperor. An emperor’s servant was well advised to show deference and proceed with caution, and Pliny took no chances. As governor of Bithynia, he referred every decision about which he had the least doubt to the emperor, for, as he explained to Trajan, who “could better guide my ignorance.” If every Roman governor did likewise, Trajan’s flow of paperwork must have been overwhelming. Among the issues that puzzled Pliny was what to do with some practitioners of a new religion called Christianity. His letters reveal how little the Roman authorities knew (or cared) about the faith that would one day transform Western civilization.

Question: How might a society’s concern to maintain order affect the work of its artists and intellectuals?

The “Good Emperors” Not surprisingly, the new emperor the Senate chose was one of its own, an elderly man named Nerva (r. 96-98 C.E.). Nerva knew that there was little chance that the army’s generals would allow a senatorial appointee to deprive them of the opportunity to make a bid for the throne, but he had a strategy for ensuring his survival. Nerva had no children and at age 66 was not likely to produce any. So like Julius Caesar, he adopted an heir. In this case the choice was not a teenaged relative, but a 45-year-old man named Trajan. Trajan commanded the legions along the Rhine, and he was the general who was most likely to win should a battle for Rome break out. The adoption set a valuable precedent. From 96 to 180 C.E. no emperor had a son, so each was free to choose his own successor. All chose wisely, and the result was the longest period of consistently excellent rule that the empire enjoyed.

Trajan (r. 98-117 C.E.) was eager to expand the empire. He created a new province called Dacia north of the Danube—a Latin-speaking enclave that lay a cultural foundation for the modern nation of Romania. His other campaigns humbled Parthia; conquered Armenia, Assyria, and Mesopotamia; and brought the Roman Empire to its height (see Map 6-2).

Italy was the preferred recruiting ground for Trajan’s legions, and his government implemented an ingenious program to boost its population. Italy’s small farmers and artisans suffered as producers in the empire’s western provinces began to compete with Italian products on the world market. To enable poorer Italians to raise more children, Trajan established the alimenta, an endowment that provided food and education for

The Ruins of Pompeii Pliny the Younger has left us an eyewitness account of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius that buried the city of Pompeii in 79 C.E.
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**Map 6-2 The Pinnacle of the Roman Empire** Augustus conquered territory that he thought would provide the empire with defensible frontiers. Claudius added Britain, but the major and final additions to the empire were the work of Trajan. Hadrian, his successor, concluded that some of the land Trajan had won was too difficult to defend, and he relinquished it.

**Question:** What portions of Rome's frontier were most vulnerable to attack?

impovertied children of both sexes. The money came from interest that landowners paid on loans the government provided to help them improve their estates. Instead of handing out money, Rome funded its welfare program from investments that promoted economic growth.

Trajan was succeeded by a distant relative, Hadrian (r. 117–138 C.E.), who spent most of his reign away from Rome, touring the provinces and cultivating close ties with his troops. He was popular with his army even though he fought few wars. He concentrated on strengthening the empire's frontiers by retreating to defensible positions. Where terrain offered no help, he built elaborate fortifications (the largest of which was a 72-mile-long wall backed up by a string of forts that spanned northern Britain).

Hadrian was a multifaceted person, a soldier and athletic outdoorsman as well as an aesthete and a scholar. He reformed Roman law to reflect Stoic principles of justice and protect slaves from abuse. He reorganized the empire's administrative system and held its bureaucrats accountable to high standards. He had such a passion for Greek literature and art that he was nicknamed "the Greek." He studied architecture, experimented with novel designs, and lavished buildings on provincial cities. The only major ancient temple still standing in Rome is one of his: the Pantheon, a drum-shaped hall roofed by a dome 141 feet in diameter.

Hadrian's last years were spent wrestling with a painful illness, but he outlived the first man he chose as his heir. When he finally died in 138, he commended the empire to the care of a senatorial aristocrat known for his cultivation of the Roman virtues of dignity, sobriety, and simplicity: Antoninus Pius (r. 138–161 C.E.). Rome faced no wars or other crises throughout Antoninus's long reign, but the quiet was deceptive. Beyond the empire's northern frontiers, hostile German tribes were training in the use of Roman arms and tactics. Shortly after Antoninus passed the reins of government to his successor, Marcus Aurelius (r. 161–180 C.E.), the storm broke.

Marcus Aurelius was 17 when Hadrian arranged for Antoninus Pius to adopt him, but he did not inherit the throne until he was 40. He was serious-minded and drawn to the study of philosophy—particularly Stoicism. Over the period of a decade he composed a series of essays reflecting on life from the Stoic perspective. Collected into a book now entitled *Meditations*, they have been variously praised as exhortations to duty and self-discipline and condemned as the musings of an unrealistic dreamer and dilettante. But whatever their possible shortcomings as philosophy, as history, they provide modern readers their only opportunity to engage a Roman emperor through his own words.

Marcus Aurelius's Stoic detachment was severely tested, for his reign was a long series of crises: plagues, earthquakes, floods, famines, and wars. When he ascended the throne, he anticipated the practice of later emperors by sharing the imperial honor with a colleague, Lucius Verus. The long frontiers of the empire were threatened in the west by Germans and in the east by Parthians, and there was plenty of work for two emperors. Verus's army succeeded in stabilizing the eastern frontier, and in 166 he returned to Rome to celebrate a triumph. Unfortunately, among the spoils his men brought back to Rome was a plague that spread throughout the empire.

After Verus's death in 169 C.E., Marcus Aurelius ruled alone. He spent most of the remainder of his reign campaigning against the Germans on the Danube frontier. He was largely successful, but at the time of his death in Vindobona (Vienna) there was still work to be done. Unfortunately, responsibility for that task passed into incompetent hands.

Alone among the five men whom history remembers as the "Good Emperors," Marcus Aurelius sired a son, Commodus (r. 180–192 C.E.). He was the only male to survive from the 13 children the emperor and his wife Faustina had in 30 years of marriage. Commodus's defects may have been apparent to his father, but Roman traditions of family and the inheritance rights of sons were strong. An attempt to deny him the throne might well have invited a succession struggle and civil war. Commodus spent his reign in dissipation and may have descended into madness. When those around him began to fear for their lives, they assassinated him and, like Domitian's killers, asked the Senate to appoint his successor. This maneuver had inaugurated the era of the Good Emperors, but this time it did not work. The armies mutinied, and the empire was again torn by civil war.
Military Rule  The winner of the civil war was Septimius Severus (r. 193–211 C.E.), commander of the Danube legions. He restored order, but his methods augured poorly for Rome's future. He increased the army's size and nearly doubled its pay. His deathbed advice for his heirs was, "Enrich the troops, and despise everyone else."

The army may always have been the basis of an emperor's power, but it was dangerous for an emperor to acknowledge this too openly. Once the soldiers realized that they were in control, it was impossible to maintain their discipline. They killed the officers who tried to keep them in line and supported those who promised to do their bidding. Of the five emperors of the Severan dynasty, only one died of natural causes. The others were killed by their own men. Following the murder of the last Severan emperor in 235, the army spun out of control. Over the next 50 years, approximately 25 men claimed the imperial title. They have been called the "Barracks Emperors," for most began their careers as commoners were killed by their own men.

An Imperial Economy  Once the Romans secured the empire's frontiers, swept pirates from the Mediterranean, and began to spread urban institutions throughout their territory, the stage was set for the West's economy to thrive. The empire was abundantly supplied with natural resources. Most regions could provide themselves with fundamental necessities, but once secure trade routes were established, some districts began to specialize in what they could do best. Olive oil was exported from Spain, grain from North Africa and Egypt, and wine from Gaul and Greece. Metal ores were mined in Britain, Spain, Dacia, and Cyprus, and manufacturing centers sprang up in many places. Glass was shipped from Egypt and the Rhineland. A popular line of red-glazed pottery was mass produced in northern Italy. Textiles came from Asia Minor, and bronze work from Italy. Despite the success of some of these enterprises, shipping problems forced most industries to remain small and to produce for local markets. Water offered the only economical means for transporting goods. Wine brought from Gaul to Rome by sea (about 450 miles) was less expensive than wine carted to the city from Italian vineyards only 50 miles away.

The economies of inland districts lagged far behind those of regions on coasts and waterways, and the empire's overall economy began to show signs of weakness as early as the Flavian period. Romans imported large quantities of luxury goods from India and the Far East and paid for them with gold and silver. This drained bullion from the West, and as the productivity of its mines decreased, emperors were hard pressed to find the precious metals they needed to mint an adequate supply of coins. The empire's success in suppressing war also had an economic downside. It diminished the supply of cheap slaves, an important element in its workforce.

Social Developments  Romans were generous in freeing slaves, and many of Rome's citizens were freedmen and their descendants. This may have given some of them sympathy for slaves. Philosophers urged respect for the humanity of slaves, and some emperors passed laws to protect them. But ideals and laws were difficult to enforce.
The gap that steadily widened between rich and poor in the Roman world blurred the line between freedom and slavery. Many of the free poor became coloni, tenant farmers who took over the work of slaves on the latifundia (large estates) of the rich. Lack of opportunity made them a virtually captive workforce. Large numbers of the indigent and unemployed also flooded into the empire's major cities and eked out livings on the public dole.

The distinction between Italy and the provinces that Augustus wanted to maintain steadily eroded. By the end of the Julio-Claudian period, most of the old republican families were dying out and a new aristocracy, drawn increasingly from the provinces, was taking their place. The settlement of Roman veterans on the frontiers, their intermarriage with local women, and the acquisition of citizenship by non-Italians who served in the auxiliaries all helped to create a larger, more inclusive class of people who identified with the empire. In 212 the Severan emperor Caracalla granted citizenship to all the free residents of the empire. Stoic philosophers preached a doctrine of universal brotherhood, and Roman jurists posited the existence of a natural law that gave equal rights to all men. Roman law is one of the great legacies of the empire, for the principles of justice it articulated have had tremendous influence on the development of Western thinking about courts, the rights of accused people, and the proper use of evidence in determining guilt and innocence.

Although citizenship and legal rights were usually viewed from a male perspective, women were not passive pawns in Roman society. They were required to have guardians to handle their legal affairs, but this had already become a mere formality by the end of the republic. Aristocratic women had great power and influence, and despite Augustus's attempt to revive some version of the patriarchal family of the early republican period, women added to their rights. Romans had long regarded marriage as a private matter that did not involve the state. Tradition had established two kinds of marriage—one that transferred the bride entirely to her husband's familia and another that preserved her relationship with her father's household. The second kind of marriage made divorce easier, for the bride and her family retained more power over her dowry. By the beginning of the empire, it had become the standard form of marriage, and divorce and remarriage, at least in aristocratic circles, were common. Augustus believed that this contributed to the decline of the Roman family, and he tried to reverse it by increasing the state's power over marriages. Legal procedures were instituted for divorces, and adultery became a crime prosecuted by the state. A sexual double standard was accepted. Husbands had nothing to fear from the law so long as they did not debase another man's wife or conspire in the misconduct of their own mate. Because men could safely conduct affairs with women who were licensed as prostitutes, some aristocratic women, who wished to continue their amorous dalliances in safety, got around the law by registering as prostitutes. Augustus's laws had little effect, and his successors made few attempts to legislate morality until the fourth century, when Christian emperors began to impose the moral principles of their faith on society.

**Intellectual Life**  Virgil, Horace, Ovid, and Livy—Augustus’s contemporaries—ended the dependence of Roman authors on Greek sources by providing them with Latin models for the composition of poetry and prose. However, the growing power of Rome’s emperors created an intellectual environment that prevented later authors from writing in the same spirit as the giants of the Golden Age. The Romanitas that inspired them was a vision of an idealized republican Rome, and this dream of liberty faded as the reality of life under autocratic emperors became clear. Scholars did not have to wait long for a warning about the danger of speaking too freely. Tiberius, Augustus's successor, convicted the author of a history of the civil wars of treason and burned his books. Elections and popular assemblies also lost much of their meaning during Tiberius's reign as the imperial bureaucracy took over more and more functions of government. This struck at the heart of Roman literary education—the study of rhetoric. Without opportunities to debate real issues and influence important decisions and elections, rhetoric became a pointless exercise. Students continued to be trained in the techniques of debate, but debate became not a means to an end but an end in itself. People wrangled over abstract hypothetical problems that had no connection with contemporary politics. As style came to be more important than substance, formal writing became increasingly elaborate, convoluted, and verbose.

Things temporarily improved when the scholarly Claudius took the throne and appointed the Stoic philosopher Seneca the Younger (c. 4 B.C.E.-65 C.E.) tutor to his heir, Nero. Literary activity revived and began what historians refer to as Rome's Silver Age. The empire produced many good writers, but none as influential as those whom Augustus had encouraged. Many of the new voices came from the provinces—a testimony to Rome's success in spreading Hellenistic civilization.

The first flush of the Silver Age was brief. During the course of his long literary career, Seneca produced plays, essays on Stoic philosophy, treatises dealing with ethical issues, and a book on natural science. Although he tried to tread carefully, his Stoic moralism needled the libertine Nero, and the emperor finally ordered him to commit suicide. Seneca's nephew, Lucan (39-65 C.E.), joined him in self-murder, leaving unfinished a passionately republican epic poem dealing with the war between Caesar and Pompey. Petronius (d. 66 C.E.), another of Nero's victims, wrote a novel, The Satyricon, from which only fragments survive. It wittily mocked the falsity, pretentiousness, and crass self-indulgence of wealthy Romans and their sycophants. Satire appealed to a generation of cynical, disillusioned artists. The Epigrams of Martial (c. 40-104 C.E.) commented ironically on a wide spectrum of Roman society, and the Satires of Juvenal (c. 55-130 C.E.) are as amusing as they are filled with anger and scorn.

Nero's sensitivity to criticism and paranoia suppressed literary activity, and conditions did not improve much under later emperors. The Flavians funded libraries and schools, but silenced philosophers of whose teachings they disapproved. A few historians thrived, however, despite the politically sensitive nature of their material. Tacitus (c. 55-120 C.E.) reflected on the empire from the hostile perspective of the senatorial aristocracy. His elegant prose is replete with pithy, memorable phrases that sum up (often pessimistic) insights into human character. Josephus (c. 37-95 C.E.), a Jewish author, wrote to provide the Romans (and his Flavian patrons) with background
The Decline of Rome

A famous historian has said that the question that should be asked about the Roman Empire is not why it fell, but how it managed to last as long as it did. His point is that the empire was inherently fragile, and to speak of its fall may be misleading. It did not come to a sudden end, and no single thing brought it crashing down. The way of life that Rome represented was incrementally transformed until the world had changed so much that it no longer made sense to call it Roman. The western provinces of the empire were economically weaker, less populous, less urbanized, and more exposed to invasion than the eastern, and by the fifth century the empire was fast becoming for them more a memory than a reality. But a region of vacillating size in the eastern Mediterranean continued to be ruled by a line of Roman emperors for another thousand years.

Rome’s Weakness

Like most ancient societies, the Roman Empire’s resources barely sufficed to meet its routine needs, and crises caused by invasions, civil wars, plagues, or crop failures could push it to the brink of collapse. Rome’s longevity owed much to the absence of a major foreign enemy who might have taken advantage of the empire’s internal problems. Parthia was the only civilized state with which Rome shared a border, and it seldom posed a threat. Rome’s most vulnerable front was its 1,500-mile-long Rhine–Danube frontier. Occasional localized campaigns were enough to hold this line until the third century, when the German tribes began to consolidate and adopt Roman military practices.

The Roman Empire was handicapped by the ancient world’s failure to make more technological progress. The empire was an agrarian state supported by fairly primitive methods of cultivation. Some plantations and manufacturing industries produced products for the world market, but waterways provided the only cost-efficient transportation. The residents of coastal districts and regions near navigable rivers could trade profitably, but people who lived inland had to be self-sufficient. Wheat brought by sea from Egypt and southern Gaul, for instance, sold more cheaply in Rome than did Italian grain raised 50 miles from the city.

Some of the empire’s trade depressed its economy. Romans had an appetite for luxury goods from the Far East, but the West produced little that India and China could not provide for themselves. The West, therefore, had to pay with gold and silver for the silks and spices it imported. The bullion this drained from the empire undermined its monetary system. By the second century, the West’s mines were being worked out, and gold and silver from which to mint coins were becoming scarce. Emperors stretched the shrinking money supply by debasing coins (that is, by mixing gold and silver with cheaper metals), but this backfired. Because these coins had less innate value, sellers demanded more of them for their goods. Prices rose, and the empire faced the problem of inflation. Overall, the costs of administering and defending the Roman Empire steadily increased, while the economy that sustained the empire declined.

From a modern perspective, the ancient world’s failure to grow its economy may appear perplexing. Hellenistic scholars made scientific breakthroughs that, if they had been exploited, could have transformed the ancient way of life. Physicists worked out the principles of levers, gears, and pulleys, and they built working models of steam turbines. Some slave-staffed businesses utilized assembly-line techniques. The Romans possessed key ingredients for an industrial revolution, but somehow they never put them together. Slavery and an aristocratic intelligentsia preoccupied with literary and
philosophical pursuits probably contributed to the absence of any motivation to find ways to make work easier and more productive.

**Diocletian and the Dominate** The rapid turnover of leaders during the half-century (235–285) when the Barracks Emperors squabbled over the throne created such confusion that Rome's imperial government lost control of huge stretches of territory. But the last of the Barracks Emperors, Diocletian (r. 285–305), restored the empire's unity and stability. His policies preserved the empire for another century, but at the cost of many aspects of its traditional way of life. Augustus's title of princeps ("first citizen") acknowledged his commitment to civilian government. But Diocletian was called dominus ("lord"). He ruled as a divine king over the dominate, a system of government ruled with the power of a military autocrat.

Diocletian's first priority was to secure the person of the emperor, for the empire could not function if its leaders continued to be frequently overthrown. To reduce the number of potential competitors for the imperial office, Diocletian divided and dispersed political authority. He doubled the number of the empire's provinces and gave each both a civilian and a military governor. This greatly diminished the strength of the provincial commanders, but at the cost of quadrupling the size of the imperial bureaucracy.

It was too dangerous to divide the army, so Diocletian consolidated an elite, mobile force under his direct command and settled a class of militarized peasants along the empire's frontiers. These farmer-soldiers were supposed to fend off attacks on their home districts long enough for the emperor to bring up the main army and restore order. Generous pay and preferential treatment (such as special legal privileges and exemption from taxes) ensured the loyalty of the emperor's troops, his comitatenses ("companions"). Diocletian may have had half a million men under arms, and their maintenance imposed a tremendous burden on his treasury.

Similarly costly was Diocletian's court. A dominus ruled by intimidation—by projecting an aura of awe-inspiring majesty. He was a remote being insulated from contact with his subjects by court functionaries and elaborate protocols. When he appeared in public, he wore elaborate robes, jewels, and the golden diadem of the sun-god.

Diocletian concluded that one emperor was not enough to defend Rome's frontier, and he shared the empire with a colleague named Maximian (286–305). He stationed himself in Asia Minor to watch the Parthian and lower Danube borders, and Maximian established a base in northern Italy from which to guard the upper Danube and the Rhine.

Having no son to inherit his throne, Diocletian tried to revive the practice of adopting successors that had worked so well throughout the second century. He decreed that each "augustus" (the emperor's title) was to choose a "caesar" (second-in-command) to assist him, and at the end of a 20-year term, the augustus was to retire and the caesar ascend to his office. This tetrarchy ("four-man rule") gave four powerful men a vested interest in working together and it promised an orderly transmission of power to experienced, competent successors (see Map 6–3).

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**Map 6-3 The Divisions of the Late Roman Empire** Diocletian's creation of separate governments for the eastern and western halves of the Roman Empire forecast a division that became permanent.

**Question:** Why were all the empire's administrative centers (Trier, Milan, Sirmium, and Nicomedia) on its northern rim rather than in a central location?

**The Transformation of Roman Society** Government policies often have unintended consequences. Diocletian's innovations certainly did, for they all increased Rome's economic difficulties. Diocletian quadrupled the size of the empire's bureaucracy, built a larger and more expensive army, and established four imperial courts. Rome could not afford the burdens this imposed, for its simple agrarian economy may have required the labor of six farmers to support each soldier, bureaucrat, and court functionary who did not till the soil.

Diocletian tried to deal with this problem by careful budgeting. He conducted censuses at five-year intervals to estimate the wealth of the empire and set tax rates. He debased the coinage to increase the money supply and encourage economic activity. He tried to halt the inflation that resulted by issuing an Edict of Prices, which decreed what could legally be charged for about a thousand items and services. All this did, however, was to force goods onto a black market that the government could not regulate.
Diocletian was finally driven to confiscate the property of his subjects to meet the expenses of his government, and this transformed the empire’s social structure. Its wealthier citizens fled its cities, where they were too exposed to its tax collectors, and took up permanent residence on their rural estates. It was impossible for the government to track them all down, and to do so could be dangerous for tax collectors. This migration had a devastating impact on the empire’s cultural institutions, for urban life was the dynamo that powered classical civilization. Without their rich and powerful citizens, cities went rapidly downhill.

Lesser individuals had fewer options for protecting their resources than the wealthy. When government confiscations bit into the working capital of farmers and artisans, they had little choice but to abandon their fields, close their shops, and resort to banditry or go on the public dole. Each year the number of productive individuals declined. This increased the burden on those who remained and drove yet more people out of business. The state tried to maintain production of essential goods by taking over industries and conscripting laborers to work on state plantations. To maintain the workforce, men were required to teach their trades to their sons, and sons were forced to take up their father’s professions. What had been, theoretically at least, a free society became a caste system. As masses of peasants (coloni) were bound to the lands they worked for the state and wealthy aristocrats, the empire began to break up into quasi-independent rural fiefdoms.

KEY QUESTION | Revisited

The Romans often faced the unhappy choice between freedom and order. Theirs was never a democratic, egalitarian society in which everyone enjoyed the same liberties, but they honored ideals of citizenship and patriotism. These ideals have had a positive influence on the development of Western nations, but Roman history also illustrates what happens to such values when societies are under stress or delivered into the hands of unscrupulous or inept leaders. The insecurity of life in Rome’s turbulent republic induced its citizens to submit to a powerful imperial government. For a long time, that government maintained stability and prosperity, and the majority of its subjects may have been content with the balance it struck between freedom and order. It is important to realize that its eventual decline into oppressive autocracy was neither inevitable nor accidental. It was the outcome of decisions that the Romans convinced themselves they were compelled to make.

Review Questions

1. Why was the Roman Republic unable to govern an empire?
2. Did Augustus save the Roman Republic or destroy it?
3. How did relationships between the military and the civilian elements in society change during the era of the empire?
4. Why might residents of the provinces and ordinary Romans have disagreed with the Roman Senate on which of Rome’s emperors were good and which bad?
5. Could the Roman Empire have been saved?
6. Is government by the people a luxury that only relatively secure societies can afford?

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.