

# ROMAN HISTORY

*Frederic Will, Ph.D.*

**Overview** Ancient Roman history covers a vast extent of time, from the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. to the 15th cent. C.E., if you want to include the long episode of the Byzantine Empire (330 C.E.--1453 C.E.). Eastern Christianity, which stemmed from the interventions of the Roman Emperor Constantine (272--337 C.E.), survived the fall of the (by then in many ways Christianized) Roman Empire.

**The Years of Monarchy (753 B.C.E.--509 B.C.E.)** The kingly period--which for the later Romans seemed their foundation, and brought to mind their origins in the kinhood of Romulus, nursed to life by a wolf--was firmly historicized by the writer Livy (59 B.C.E.--17 C.E.). The details of this period remain cloudy to this day, and by and large exists as a mythical construct by which later Romans shored up their sense of identity.

**The Roman Republic (509 B.C.E.--29 B.C.E.)** The five hundred years of the Roman Republic were essentially a period during which the Roman state was able to consolidate its position in Italy, and against threatening neighbors. The three Samnite Wars, fought by the Roman army against local tribes, in the second half of the fourth century, B.C.E., were representative of the consolidation job required by the Romans, to take full possession of the Italic peninsula. The Punic Wars (264-146 B.C.E.), fought against a North African kingdom which at its strongest threatened to overthrow Rome, were in the end a signal victory for the Roman State, and provided a basis on which a new culture could flourish.

**The End of the Roman Republic** By the First Century B.C.E. the Roman Republic had grown in power and wealth; one consequence was a growing wealth inequality, which needed addressing, as the disadvantaged were growing more impatient with their lot. At the same time an intense power struggle for control of Rome, a struggle catering to the support of the masses, was storming up, driving skyward the fortunes of such as Julius Caesar, proclaimed dictator but then assassinated in 44 B.C.E. The fateful turn of history, for the Roman state, came at the Battle of Actium (31 B.C.E.), in which Octavian, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, defeated the military forces of Mark Antony and Cleopatra; ten years later the Roman Senate was to declare Octavian (Augustus) Emperor, and to put the Roman stamp of approval onto Empire.

**The Roman Empire of the West (29 B.C.E.--476 C.E.)** The accession to power of Augustus was to set the stage for a drama which was to play out over much of the then civilized world and to establish the foundations for many of the practices--governmental, legal, artistic--with which we live today. With the reality of Imperial power above them, the Roman people were now to find themselves at the mercy of an unpredictable cast of characters, which included, in the century following Augustus, such extravagant deviants as Caligula, Claudius, and Nero; men friendly to corruption, yet at the same time builders of what has been called the Pax Romana, the extended period of relative peace which marked the first three centuries of the Roman Empire. By the conclusion of the fourth century the Roman Empire had expanded to global proportions, reaching India and England, and settling each in the Roman fashion, under Roman laws, with Roman citizenship privileges, and with all the advantages of the metropolis behind them. So extensive a development, of course, was unlikely to survive the cohort of threats that was gradually developing within it, from civil disorders, economic melt downs, rival claimants to the imperial power, and of course strong cultural counter currents, like Christianity, which began to chew at the fabric of Roman culture. The end of the Empire in the West was soon to be sealed by the incursions of barbarians, for whom the advantages of Roman civilization meant little more than opportunities for plunder. By this point, and in fact since the reign of the Emperor Constantine (306 C.E.--324 C.E.), the energies of the western Roman Empire had been largely sapped, and the Empire's leading power center, named Constantinople after the Emperor Constantine, had become the seat of a new Rome, Byzantium.

## Readings

Nicolet, Claude, *Space, Geography and Politics in the Early Roman Empire*, Ann Arbor 1991.

Bowersock, Glen; Brown, Peter; Graber, Oleg, *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, Cambridge, 1999.

### **Discussion questions**

What do you see as the main cause of the Fall of the Roman Empire? Was it barbarian attacks, Christianity, economics? Or was there some internal aging that defies any easy detective work?

Has any other state lasted longer than the Roman Empire? The continuous seeming government of China? What do you see as the secret of the Roman Empire's longevity?

What do you think led to the overthrow of the Roman Republic? Was it some set of causes that lay in the Republic itself? Or was it the configuration of power plays by competing strongmen in late first century B.C.E. Rome?