
UNIT 1 ROMAN EMPIRE: POLITICAL SYSTEM*

Structure

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

Following the end of the Persian empire, and with the disruption of the unity of Alexander's Macedonian empire, a new political entity rose to prominence in the Mediterranean region. This was the Roman empire which became the largest and most enduring empire in antiquity. After going through this Unit, you should be able to:

- understand the political developments of the Roman empire,
- learn the different organs of the Roman state, such as the Senate, Oligarchical Council, Assembly, etc.,
- appreciate various orders of the society that were hierarchical in nature,
- list the reforms initiated in different realms of society,
- evaluate the major initiatives of Augustus, and
- explain the reasons of its decline.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The nucleus of the Roman empire was located in Italy and it encompassed the entire Mediterranean world. As is generally stated, 'Rome was not built in a day'¹. The history of Rome began in the 8th century BCE as a small pastoral community in Central Italy but came to acquire the status of a vast Empire in the ancient world. This Empire stretched from Scotland in the north to Egypt in the south, and from Portugal in the west to Iraq in the East. This Unit seeks to examine the main periods in the history of ancient Rome and the political system that supported it. These historical phases include: (a) the early history of Rome as a kingdom; (b) the Republic; (c) the Principate or Augustan age; and (d) the Late Empire.

1.2 EARLY HISTORY OF ROME

The early history of Rome is very sketchy and is based largely on a series of legends. But the main source is historian Livy (64-17 BCE) who wrote the history of Rome from its very foundation until his own times. The early Romans were predominantly people of pastoral community, keeping cattle, pigs, goats and sheep, and living in scattered villages, speaking a language of Indo-European origin which might be called proto-Latin. The whole culture was contextualized in a pre-urban phase. At some point in time scattered communities coalesced into a larger unit to which for the first time the name of Rome was given.

The city has many different legends about its foundations. According to the Etruscan legend, it was founded in 753 BCE by two brothers – Romulus and Remus. It is said that it was built when they enclosed settlements along the river Tiber by a wall. The river gave the city a trade route to the north and access to the sea at its port of Ostia to the south. Rome lay between the two cultures: with the Greek colonies to the south and the Etruscan settlements to the North. Rome was physically and literally the crossing juncture of Etruscan and Greek cultures. It is believed that Romulus was the first of the seven kings who ruled over Rome from 753 to 509 BCE.

The most powerful people in Italy at this time were the Etruscans. Etruscans came to

¹ John Heywood, an English playwright.

rule over Rome for a little more than hundred years (616 - 510 BCE). Rome was galvanized by contact with the higher civilization of the Etruscans. They came to have a profound influence on the early development of Rome. The Etruscan rule brought about urbanization and Rome became for the first time an important centre of trade. Moreover, their engineering skills allowed them to drain the marshlands between the Capitoline and Palatine hills and farming also intensified under them. The Romans were also influenced by their religious practices. Temples were built and cult statues were made. A series of political and military reforms were introduced which included a census (the placing of an obligation to army service on a property basis) and the setting up of a new political assembly, the *Comitia Centuriata*.

Archaeological evidence suggests that Etruscan power in Italy declined at the end of the sixth century BCE. In Rome, the last Etruscan king is believed to have been expelled and the Republic was set up in 509 BCE.

1.3 ESTABLISHMENT OF ROMAN REPUBLIC AND MILITARY EXPANSION

Roman expansion can be studied in two phases. The first phase was the period of initial consolidation; while in the second phase Romans consolidated across the Mediterranean.

1.3.1 First Phase of the Conquest

All writers on Rome present the end of monarchy and the establishment of the Republic as one of the fundamental events in Roman history. In 509 BCE, Etruscan dynasty of Tarquins was expelled from Rome which led to the establishment of republic governed by two **Consuls**. Throughout the fifth century BCE, the main object of Roman polity was to defend her own territory and the plains of Latium from the enemies with the support of kindred people. Thus, Rome formed a league with other Latin cities (named after the surrounding region of Latium) from three ferocious tribes from neighbouring hills. In 406 BCE the Romans attacked their greatest rival, the Etruscan city of Veii, finally conquering it in 396 BCE. This victory was crucial because it gave Rome access to the rich resources of Central Italy. After establishing its power in central Italy, Rome turned to southern Italy which had been colonized by the Greeks. Finally the Roman power was established when the Greeks were defeated in a number of fiercely fought battles. By 266 BCE, the long and arduous conquest of Peninsular Italy was complete. Now, the entire Peninsula got directly or indirectly subjugated to Rome.

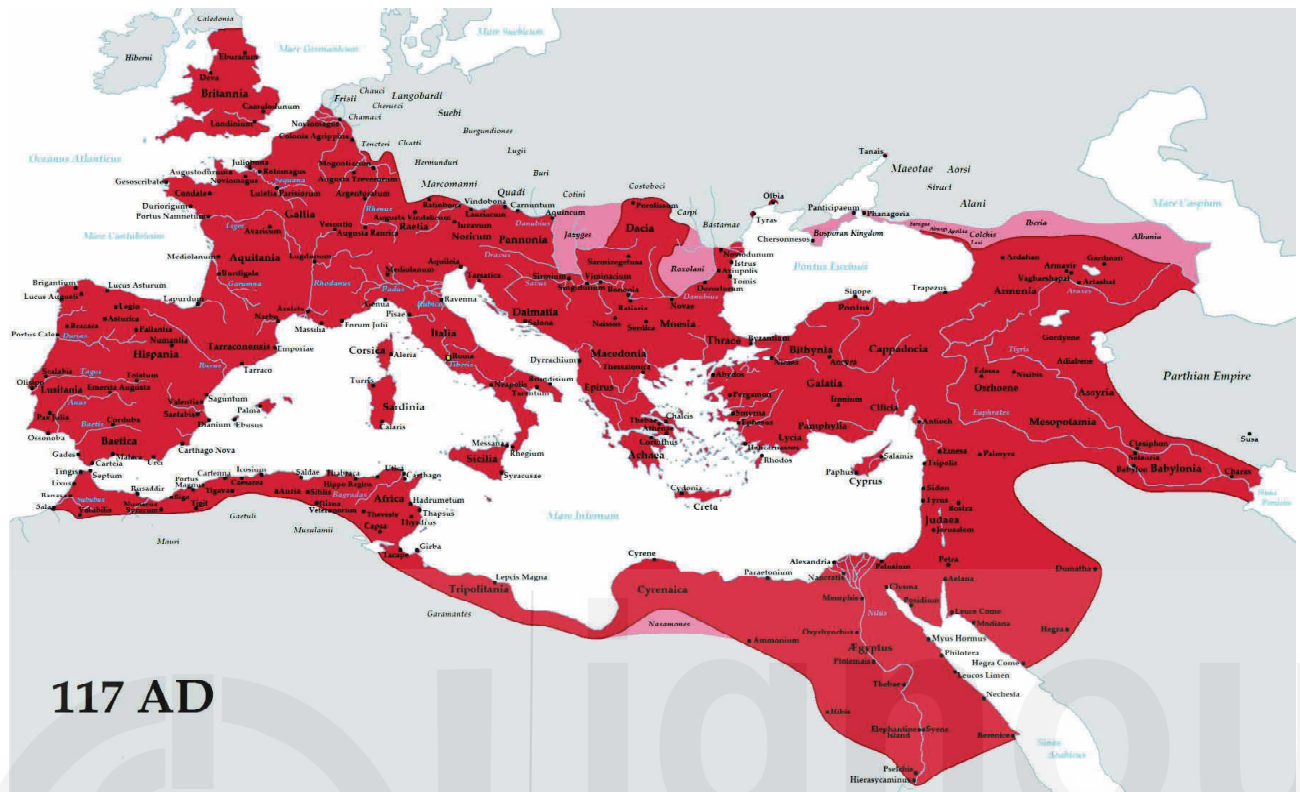
1.3.2 Second Phase of the Conquest

After controlling Italy, Rome moved to become the master of the Mediterranean world (264 -133 BCE). By the middle of the third century BCE, the Republic had embarked on a series of military exploits known as Punic wars². These wars were fought against Carthage, which was a colony founded by Phoenicia in modern Tunisia and controlled vast agricultural and commercial resources of Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica and eastern portions of the Iberian peninsula. Three Punic wars were fought and by the end of the third Punic war the empire of Carthage was completely destroyed and its territories were annexed by Rome. The territories annexed during the course of the Punic wars were reorganized as Roman provinces of Sicily, Spain and Africa.

In the East, the Roman Republic fought Macedonia and other Greek states and brought them under their control. The Roman influence also extended to cover Anatolia and

² First Punic War, 264-241 BCE; Second Punic War, 218-201 BCE; Third Punic War, 149-146 BCE.

spread over to Egypt. Thus, the Roman influence came to be established in the middle of the Mediterranean region by the middle of the second century BCE.



Map 1.1: The Roman Empire at its greatest extent, 117 CE, the time of Trajan's death

Credit: Tataryn

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Empire#/media/File:Roman_Empire_Trajan_117AD.png

1.4 POLITICAL STRUCTURE OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC

The Republic had three major components – the Senate, the Magistrates and the People. At the helm of republican state were two Consuls. They were assisted by a large number of Magistrates. Then there were Censors responsible for Census conducted every five years and the status of each citizen. Then there were assemblies of tribes, those of **Patricians** and **Plebeians**.

1.4.1 The Senate

The Republic was dominated by the Senate and membership was restricted to the Patrician class (land owning aristocrats). Membership of the Senate was for life and it was co-optive (i.e. only the original members could choose additional or new members). The Senate was, thus, an assembly of aristocratic landowners that wielded wide-ranging powers. The great and growing powers of the Senate rested upon its ability to initiate legislation, to prolong the powers of the Magistrates and to control foreign affairs. They were further increased by the collective influence, wealth and experience of its members.

1.4.2 The Magistrates

The highest officials of the Republic were elected by the people every year. The most important of these were the two consuls, who presided over the Senate and exercised executive, military and judicial authority. This institution of the consulates was legally monopolised by the closed order of the Patrician down to 366 BCE, when the recently enriched Plebeians forced the Patrician nobility to concede access to one of the two

offices of consuls. But it was only in 172 BCE that both the consuls were for the first time Plebeians. The former consuls automatically became members of the Senate. Accordingly, the membership of the Senate was enlarged and apart from Patrician class, it also came to include members of the recently enriched Plebeian class.

Apart from the Consuls, the Roman Republic had several other elected Magistrates/ Consuls. The *praetors* had charge of administration of the law. The *Censor*, originally appointed as a registrar and mainly for the purpose of administration of taxes, soon acquired a wide jurisdiction on matters of morality. The *aediles* were in charge of public works, streets and buildings within the Roman streets.

1.4.3 The People

The people in their various assemblies elected the Magistrate, approved or rejected bills laid before them and decided on issues of war and peace. In theory, the principle of sovereignty was vested in them, but they met when summoned by a Magistrate and voted without discussion on what was laid before them.

1.4.4 The Assembly

Comitia meant the place where people assembled. Thus, Roman assemblies were known as *Comitia*. These assemblies were convened by the Magistrate from time to time to put to vote matters of importance.

Comitia Curiata

Comitia Curiata was the assembly of all citizens. The word *curiata* was derived from the Roman kinship based tribal units known as *curiae*. These were thirty in all and divided into three tribes each consisting of ten such *curiae*. *Curiate* had no right to discuss matters, it could simply accept or reject them. They decided upon the election of Magistrates, priestly officers, passed laws, decided upon war and peace. It was *curiae* who decreed the abolition of monarchy and establishment of the republic. No decree of *Centuriata* could become law unless sanctioned by the *curiae*.

Though both Plebeians and Patricians formed part of these *curiae*, often Patricians manipulated matters using their influence. Often the voices of Plebeians became irrelevant to the extent that later each *curiae* started sending just one person to attend the assembly for voting. Gradually patricians' dominance was so much that it hardly reflected the interests of the Plebeians and there was great demand and pressure to regroup them which led to the formation of a new assembly, the *Comitia Centuriata*.

Servius Inllius (r.575-535 BCE) transferred principal rights of *Comitia Curiata* to *Comitia Centuriata*. Nonetheless, *Curiata* could retain the right to sanction or reject any matter passed by the *Centuriata*. By the Punic war period, *Curiata* almost lost its importance and fell in abeyance and its jurisdiction largely shrank to matters of socio-religious nature.

Comitia Centuriata

Comitia Centuriata, like *Curiata* was an assembly of all citizens which included Patricians and Plebeians both (exception being slaves, *peregrini* [foreigners], women and *aerarii* [those who were subject to poll-tax]). However, they were grouped differently. The thirty *curiae* gave way to 193 '*centuriae*' (*Centuriae* because each was supposed to contain 100 men, though it was not necessarily always the case). These *centuriae* were grouped into five classes. First three were exclusive to the aristocracy and the landed classes. The propertyless citizens labelled as *proletarii*, were placed in the last class, though numerically they were the largest and the numbers of first three were quite less. However, numbers had no meaning for voting it was not

the head counts (one vote, one person) but the vote per 'century' counted and *proletarii* was accommodated in just one 'century' each of 193. Thus, in spite of numerical minority, Patrician voice dominated in the assembly. If these classes decided upon any issue, there was no need for Plebeians to vote. It was in fact rare that Plebeians were called upon to vote. This could have happened with the *equites* (originally the cavalry of the Roman army, later emerged among the wealthy class of political importance).

Formed around 450 BCE, *Centuriata* remained the principal assembly of citizens throughout the republican period. Servius Iulius transferred from *Comitia* powers of electing Magistrates, consuls and censors, passing of laws (the famous laws of the twelve tables were sanctioned by the *Centuriata*), jurisdiction of the right to appeal to *Centuriata*, matters pertaining to war and peace all of which were the prerogative of the assembly.

Concilium Plebis or Comitia Plebis Tribune

Concilium Plebis was exclusively the assembly of Plebeians. All the issues pertaining to Plebeians were discussed here. It elected Plebeians *aediles* (responsible for the maintenance of public buildings) and the *tribunes* of the *plebs*. Its resolutions were only *plebi sula* (law was binding only on *plebis*). Its institutional acceptance and the success of the assembly can be judged by the fact that in 494 BCE under *Plebis* pressure, state agreed to induct two officers known as *tribune* elected by the assembly. By 448 BCE, their number increased to ten *tribune*. Its significance lies in the fact that it granted access to power to Plebeians, thus, office of *tribune* became most sought after among the wealthy Plebeians.

There was another assembly *Comitia populi tributa* (assembly of the tribal people) which consisted of all citizens and grouped into three tribes. It was the earliest assembly that existed since the time of monarchy. All the male adults of the tribe were members of the assembly. It was arranged according to the distribution of the tribes.



Figure 1.1: Slave holding writing tablets for his master (relief from a 4th century sarcophagus), Archaeological Museum in Milan (Italy)

Credit: Giovanni Dall'Orto

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Empire#/media/File:Sarcophago_avvocato_Valerius_Petruianus-optimized.jpg

1.5 POLITICAL STRUGGLE BETWEEN THE ORDERS

There is always a close link between the society and political structures of any given civilization. The Roman Republic society, as Amar Farooqui mentions, was marked by a permanent division of the citizen into two 'orders': the Patrician order and the Plebeian order. The Patricians were land-owning aristocrats who, from the beginning of the Republic, enjoyed the monopoly of the political, social and economic power. Plebeians were the poorer citizens who were small landholders, artisans, merchants and labourers. Expansion in the Mediterranean brought the growth of a new business class (the Equites) whose individual wealth often exceeded that of the landed aristocracy (the Patrician class). The Patricians considered the commercial growth of the Equities as ill-gotten and soon the two groups were in open conflict, the 'Equites' joining ranks with the Plebeians.

From the fifth century BCE there was growing struggle between the Patrician and the Plebeian classes. From the early years of the Republic, the Senate had tried to concentrate all political power in their hands and the Plebeians struggled to get their share in the government. Roman sources stress that the entire contest that lasted for over five generations was carried out with no bloodshed and with the minimum of violence. It was so because each of the parties involved in this contest needed the support of the other. The Roman aristocracy needed support of the peasantry who were recruited in the army and were required to fight the wars and defend the state. The Plebeians needed the leadership and experience of the Patricians. Therefore, there was a readiness for compromise.

1.5.1 First Phase of the Conflict and Changes in the Constitution

For the Plebeians of the fifth century BCE, the objective was to acquire protection against unjust and arbitrary acts of the Senate and the Magistrates. This protection was made effective when they had procured publication of a written Code of law in the 'Twelve Tables' of 450 BCE³. This Code reduced the scope for the arbitrary exercise of judicial authority by the Patricians. Moreover, in 326 BCE a law was passed which prohibited the enslavement of Roman citizens for non-repayment of debts. Thus, 'debt bondage' was abolished. In 445 BCE the right of intermarriage between Patrician and Plebeian was recognized and the wealthier Plebeian had a major grievance removed. In the economic distress after 390 BCE (which are discussed in **Section 2.3** and **Section 2.4** in **Unit 2** of this Course) the question of just distribution of public land was one of the main issue of contestation. In 367 BCE, after along struggle some limits were established on the amount of land to be held by an individual.

In the political field, the newly enriched Plebeians wanted to break into the limited circle of Patricians. They forced the 'Patrician' nobility to concede access to one of the two offices of consuls from 266 BCE onwards. However, it was not until 172 BCE that for the first time both Consuls were recruited from the Plebeians (as mentioned above). As Perry Anderson suggests, this change only led to the broadening of the composition of the Senate itself, since former consuls automatically became Senators. The power of the Patrician aristocracy was not overthrown and the wealthier Plebeians passed over to the other side to form the social formation of a widened nobility.

Along with the struggle of wealthy Plebeians, the poor Plebeians were also struggling to gain increased rights within the Republic. An effective demonstration of their power

³ Laws drafted and inscribed by *decomviri* (board of ten-men) on 12 bronze tablets in 451-450 BCE heralding the beginning of written laws passed by the state for citizens, thus establishing equality of all citizens in the eyes of the state law.

was made when they threatened to leave Rome and establish a state of their own. As a result of this pressure, a **tribal assembly** was set up (in the beginning known as '*Concilium Plebis*'). By a law of 287 BCE, the decisions of the '*Concilium Plebis*' were binding on the state and carried the force of law (See **Section 1.4.4** for details).



Figure 1.2: Roman civilians examining the Twelve Tables after they were first implemented

Credit: staff.4j.lane.edu

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve_Tables#/media/File:Twelve_Tables_Engraving.jpg

It also came to appoint its own officers, the '**tribunes**' who ultimately acquired the power of veto over the acts of any Roman Magistrates. Tribunes were two in number and represented, in theory, the interests of the Plebeians. It was a secondary and parallel agency designed to protect the poor from the oppression of the rich.

Significance of Changes in the Constitution

It seems that the interests of the Plebeians were addressed for the time being. But, as P. Anderson points out, despite the constitution undergoing popular modifications as a result of fierce and long social struggle, it was never abrogated or replaced. Instead a hereditary nobility retained unbroken power through this complex constitution. The Tribune and Tribal assembly were simply added to the central existing institution of the Senate, Consulates and *Centuriate* Assembly. They did not lead to the abolition or reduction in the power of the aristocracy that continued to dominate the Republic. Often, the struggle of the poorer classes was lead by wealthy Plebeians and the **Tribunes**, generally men of considerable wealth became, for long periods, docile instruments of the Senate.

1.5.2 Second Phase of the Conflict

The struggle between Orders went into abeyance for a century and a half. When it broke out again, it was based on new issues and with a new alignment of contestants. In the last century of the Roman Republic, a series of campaigns won Rome its mastery of the Mediterranean world (the Punic, Macedonian, Jugurthine, Mithridatic and Gallic wars). It led to the import of war captives to be employed by the **senatorial aristocracy** as slaves. On the other hand, many ferocious struggles were fought in the country (the Hannibalic, Social and Civil wars) delivering into the hands of the senatorial oligarchy large territories appropriated from the defeated people. The Roman wars of expansion thus led to an enormous increase in the power and wealth of the senatorial aristocracy. It also led to the emergence of a new rural institution of '**Latifundia**' – groups of slaves were employed in vast tracts of land owned by the wealthy landowners.

Check Your Progress-1

Roman Empire: Political System

- 1) Trace the early history of Rome in about 50 words.

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- 2) Describe the phases of Roman expansion from c. 510 to 27 BCE.

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- 3) What were the Punic Wars? Explain their role in the expansion of the Roman Empire.

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- 4) Explain the political structure of Rome.

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- 5) What led to the conflict of 'Orders' in Roman Republic? Did it lead to any significant changes in the political structure?

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1.6 REFORMS OF THE GRACCHI BROTHERS

This phase is marked by the declining peasantry and merging military conflicts.

1.6.1 Decline of the Peasantry or ‘Assidui Class’

The wars of conquest at the same time led to a sharp decline of the peasantry. They had provided the manpower for successful campaigns which helped Rome to gain mastery of the Mediterranean world but they did not receive anything in return. According to the Roman law, adult male citizens with a minimum property qualification were to compulsorily serve in the army. They died in thousands as they were called in the Legions (basic military unit) year after year, while those who survived were unable to maintain their farms at home, which were increasingly absorbed by the nobility. After 146 BCE the struggle of the peasants centred around the question of land reforms. According to Amar Farooqui, the question of land reforms had assumed urgency not only due to the acute distress of the peasants but also because, without land peasants were unable to render military service. The need for agrarian reforms was widely felt. But these were unacceptable to the aristocracy.

It was due to the violent opposition of the Senate that the reforms, aimed at limiting the amount of land one individual could own and for the redistribution of surplus land which Tiberius Gracchus (prominent member of the Populares, a reformist faction; d. 133 BCE) introduced were defeated, and the Tribune was assassinated. Later, his younger brother, Gaius Gracchus (elected for Tribune in 123 BCE) tried to introduce more radical reforms aiming at social justice. His new reforms included reforming the provincial administration and taxation, guaranteeing a subsidized grain supply to poorer citizens (the ‘*proletarii*’ class) as well as judicial and land reforms. He also proposed to extend the Roman citizenship to the Italian allies (details will be discussed in **Unit 2** of this Course).

The Senate once again vigorously opposed the reforms and Gaius Gracchus too was murdered (121 BCE) at the instigation of the Senate and his laws were repealed. The peasant agitation for land came to be stifled by the suppression of the Gracchi brothers. Moreover, the import of grain cheaply from abroad aggravated their misery further. Thus, peasant unrest sharpened the class conflict and contributed to the decline of the republic.

1.6.2 Growing Discontent among the Soldiers

At the same time, along with peasant distress, growing discontent among the soldiers also contributed to the mounting disorder of the Republic. The **senatorial aristocracy** had profited enormously from the wars of expansion and acquisition of a vast empire. But it was totally unwilling to compensate the soldiers whose fighting had yielded riches. The soldiers, who had been agitating for the grant of land and donatives upon their discharge from service, were now completely disillusioned with the state. The result was that soldiers started looking up to their victorious generals who could guarantee them plunder or donatives by their personal power. As P. Anderson states, that from the times of Gaius Marius (156-86 BCE) and Lucius Sulla (138-78 BCE) onwards, soldiers looked to their generals for economic rehabilitation and generals used their soldiers for political advancement. The result was the outbreak of civil wars with the army becoming an important factor in the politics of Roman society.

1.6.3 Role of Urban Poor in the Growing Unrest

The urban proletariat also exerted considerable pressure in the civil wars that marked the last century of the Republic. P. Anderson very aptly points out that Roman expansionism tended to reduce the number of ‘**assidui**’ who provided the conscripts

and casualties for the army with which it was conducted. There was, as a result, a steady decline in the numbers of the 'assidui' and a sharp increase in the size of the 'proletarii' (property-less citizens) class. This was also the result of increasing monopolisation of the land by the aristocracy. The Roman society, thus, got completely transformed and by the end of the 3rd century BCE there was already an absolute majority of citizens who were rendered property-less.

The plight of the urban masses acutely sharpened the crisis of senatorial power. Growing rural drift from the land and huge import of slaves created a vast metropolis which could not be controlled easily. In 53 BCE, free grain was distributed for the first time and soon it became a permanent fact of the Roman political life. It was the support of the urban proletariat which brought Pompey the Great (Roman general; d. 48 BCE) to power and, as P. Anderson mentions, it set in motion the final military disintegration of the Republic. Later, it was the popular support that led to the triumph of Julius Caesar (d. 44 BCE) who became a threat to the Senate. After Caesar's assassination, it was once again the support of the urban mob which forced the senate to plead to Augustus (first emperor of the Roman Empire; r. 27 BCE-14 CE) for becoming the consul and assume power.

1.7 THE LAST CENTURY OF THE REPUBLIC AND THE RISE OF SUCCESSFUL MILITARY COMMANDERS

As the tension between senatorial aristocracy and the common people grew during the final century of the Republic, ambitious politicians tried to take advantage by identifying with one or the other. The dictatorship of Sulla was a turning point in the history of the Republic. From now on, powerful military commanders or 'warlords' controlled the Roman empire. Their personal rivalries hastened the decline of the Republic. This period, which witnessed serious social and political crisis, was also a period of major military campaigns in West Asia.

1.7.1 First 'Triumvirate'

Sulla, a successful military general, championed the cause of the Senate and carried out a number of reforms which strengthened the powers of the Senate, but powers of those of the tribunes were seriously curtailed. His reforms were quickly undone by other generals, notably Pompey and Crassus (d. 53 BCE). A decisive moment came in 60 BCE when Pompey and Crassus joined forces with Julius Caesar to form the 'Triumvirate' – a ruling board of three men, which had the support of the army and the people. The Senate was left powerless. However, differences between the two generals broke out after the death of Crassus. Pompey felt threatened by Caesar's military power and successes, and aligned with the Senate. Caesar, a brilliant general and the victor of Gaul, was able to defeat his rivals and in 44 BCE became the 'dictator for life' at Rome. But his sweeping reforms aroused the apprehensions of many at Rome that he was entertaining ambitions of becoming a monarch. Led by Brutus, one of Caesar's closest friends, a group of assassins stabbed him to death in 44 BCE.

1.7.2 Second 'Triumvirate'

The conspirators' victory was not everlasting. Two of Caesar's lieutenants, Mark Antony and Lepidus, joined forces with his adopted heir, Octavian, to lead a campaign against them. Thereafter, the 'Second Triumvirate' was formed. After achieving significant victory over their rivals, the Second Triumvirate came to power and divided the empire between

them. Soon dissensions broke out among them and after depriving Lepidus of all his powers, Octavian decisively defeated Mark Antony in the battle of Actium (31 BCE), the final war of the Roman Republic. Octavian now became undisputed master of the Roman world and the Republic came to an end and a new era started.

1.8 THE AUGUSTAN AGE

Octavian (27 BCE-14 CE) came to power after defeating his rival Mark Antony at the battle of Actium in 31 BCE. Octavian received the title of Augustus, 'the Revered', a title previously used for gods, from the Senate. He was often referred to as '*Princeps*' or 'the first citizen'. He brought peace to Rome by establishing monarchy hidden behind a republican façade. Augustus also took on the name of 'Caesar' after his adoptive father. He was Rome's first 'emperor', his name in Latin meant 'imperator' meaning 'victorious general'. It was a title conferred on him by the army. For the next five centuries, Rome would be ruled by emperors. Hence, this period in the history of Rome is referred to as the 'age of Empire'.

During the first two centuries of the Empire (30 BCE to 180 CE) imperial greatness, known as the '*Pax Romana*' (Roman Peace) followed. The unification of the Mediterranean world improved governance and helped in economic expansion. In the third century CE, however, the Roman Empire began to decline. Some emperors took staunch measures to restore order but the final blow was struck in its collapse by the barbarian invasions.

The Reforms of Augustus

Augustus introduced reforms in different realms of the Roman empire:

- i) Political and Constitutional,
- ii) Administrative,
- iii) Army,
- iv) Society and economy.

1.8.1 Political and Constitutional Reforms

Augustus had decided to outwardly preserve the republican institutions while combining it with strong personal leadership. He provided the Senate with a lot of authority. He consulted it on important issues, allowed it to retain control over Italy and half of the provinces. Augustus also gave the Senate the legislative functions of the nearly defunct Tribal assembly.

However, Augustus kept the power of Tribune, which gave him the right to initiate and to veto legislation. He also kept with himself the governorship of the frontier provinces, where the armies were stationed. His control of the army meant that his power could not be successfully challenged. He gradually came to concentrate unlimited powers in his own hands and the Senate slowly faded into the background. The republican institutions and magistracies retained nothing from the past but their names.

1.8.2 Administrative Reforms

By a series of reforms, Augustus was able to reduce the civil strife of the Late Republic and thus stabilised the whole Roman social order. A new bureaucracy was drawn from the Equestrian order with such titles as '*Praefecti*', '*Procurators*', or '*Praesides*'. All bureaucrats were paid stipends for their duties and were responsible to the *Princeps*⁴.

⁴ Initially leading member of the Senate; later title adopted by Augustus in 23 BCE.

The disorders in Rome during the Late Republic (146 - 27 BCE) had convinced Augustus that it was necessary to maintain safety, harmony, and law and order. He, therefore, established a regular corps of night police, seven companies (*cohorts*) of watchmen, who were freed men and served as police and firemen. He appointed an Equestrian prefect to command them. For himself, he created a Praetorian guard (elite Unit of the Imperial Roman army) of initially nine *cohorts*. Not more than three of these were stationed in Rome and the rest were stationed in neighbouring regions. The commanders of the Praetorian guards were usually five in number and were Equestrian. They became the chief assistants to the emperors. Thus, the monopoly of central political office enjoyed by the Roman aristocracy was broken.

The imperial unification was completed in 212 CE when the Emperor Antoninus granted Roman citizenship to nearly all free inhabitants throughout the Empire. An imperial postal service was created to link the distant provinces of the empire together for the first time, with a regular communication system. Provincial governors soon came to be paid regular salaries. Thus, there was increasing 'provincialization' of central power within the Empire.

1.8.3 Reforms in the Army

Augustus created a strong professional army. He allotted land to thousands of soldiers who were demobilized after the civil wars. Many of these allotments were financed out of his personal fortunes. These grants did much to pacify the peasant-soldiery. Already Julius Caesar had doubled the pay of the soldiers on active service. This increase was maintained by the Principate.

Most of the soldiers came from the class of small-landholders or 'assidui' who were ruined by the long wars fought both outside and within Italy. Their support had brought Octavian to power. Moreover, from 6 CE onwards, war-veterans (soldiers who were discharged after long service) received cash payments. This was worth thirteen years' wages and were paid out of a specially created military treasury (financed by modest sales and inheritance taxes on the propertied classes of Italy). The army was further reduced from 58 to 32 *legions* and converted into a professional and permanent force. This paved the way for a revolutionary reform – lifting of conscription (compulsory military service for the citizens) by the time of Tiberius. This provided a much needed relief to the Italian small-landholders with military burden.

1.8.4 Social and Economic Reforms

Augustus presented himself as a chief patron of the poorer citizens. In the capital, the urban proletariat was kept satisfied with the distribution of corn. With the inclusion of Egypt in the Empire, the supply of corn became more regular. Later, by the end of the second century CE, the public distribution of food had come to include wine and oil. An ambitious building programme was launched, which provided considerable employment to the poor. He tried to persuade wealthy senators to continue the republican practice of constructing public buildings at their own expense or providing entertainment to the citizens. But, with time the emperors took the lead in this regard. Augustus is said to have boasted that he found Rome as a city of brick and left it as a city of marble.

Religion and Morality

Augustus developed a programme to restore traditional values of family and religion. He passed laws to curb adultery and divorce, and encouraged early marriage and large families. His own austere behaviour set a personal example for his people. He exiled the poet Ovid to the Black Sea for writing racy love poems. He even exiled his only child, Julia, for her amorous behaviour to a tiny island for five years. She was not

allowed to interact with men and she was banned from drinking wine. Augustus encouraged the Romans to return to traditional religious practices. Many of the new and restored buildings were temples. He also revived the old cults and banned the worship of some foreign gods.

Economic Reforms

The Unification of Rome had far-reaching economic consequences. The '*Pax Romana*' was responsible for the elimination of tolls and other artificial barriers, the suppression of piracy and brigandage, and the establishment of reliable coinage. These factors along with the long period of peace the Empire had experienced, explain largely the great expansion of commerce that took place in the first and second centuries CE. Manufacturing was also stimulated, but its expansion was limited since wealth remained concentrated in the hands of a few and there was no mass market for goods produced. The economy of the Early Empire remained basically agrarian, and the huge estates, *Latifundia*, prospered (For further details, see **Unit 2** of this Course).

1.9 EXTENT OF THE EARLY EMPIRE

The political and administrative unification was matched by external security and economic prosperity. The Dacian kingdom (region southeast of the Danube) was conquered and its gold mines annexed. The Asian frontiers were extended and consolidated. From the time of Augustus until that of Trajan (98-117 CE), the Roman Empire continued to expand. Only in the modern-day Germany did the Roman troops meet defeat, a setback which convinced Augustus to hold the Roman borders at Rhine and Danube. Later, in 43 CE, the Emperor Claudius began the conquest of Britain, and at the beginning of the next century, Trajan pushed beyond Danube to add Dacia (modern-day Romania) to the Empire. The territorial limits of the Roman empire had reached its threshold. In the third century CE, these limits began to recede.

The immediate successors of Augustus came from his own family and are known as the Julio-Claudian emperors. Nero (54-68 CE) was the last emperor of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Vespasian (69-79 CE) was the first emperor who had no connection with the old Roman nobility and was a powerful army commander. He founded the Flavian dynasty. When Domitian (81-96 CE), the last emperor of the Flavian dynasty was assassinated, the Senate appointed Nerva (96-98 CE) and the empire now entered into a period of greater peace and prosperity, under the rule of 'Five good emperors' who ruled from 96 CE to 180 CE. However, after the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161-180 CE), the decline of the Empire set in.

1.10 LATE EMPIRE

The decline of the empire set in during the closing years of second century CE, though the empire lasted for another hundred years.

1.10.1 Third Century CE and Political Instability

During the third century CE the empire entered a period of great instability. Between 235 CE and 284 CE, more than 50 emperors or heirs were named by different armies. Within the borders of the Roman empire, a series of disasters struck. Germanic tribes invaded and ravaged the Roman empire. Franks and other Germanic tribes invaded Gaul and Spain, Alamanni (Germanic tribes of Upper Rhine) marched into Italy, while Goths crossed the sea to plunder Asia Minor. Domestic political crisis and foreign invasions were soon followed by successive epidemics, further weakening and reducing

the populations of the Empire already reduced by wars. This crisis is typically viewed as marking the beginning of the Late Roman Empire.

1.10.2 Diocletian and Measures taken to Re-stabilize the Empire

The civil wars which raged in the empire, slowly came to an end with the Diocletian (284 CE to 305 CE) coming to power. He strove to strengthen the army. Soldiers became the privileged class in place of the landed aristocracy. The Senate lost all its powers. Diocletian was convinced that the empire was too large to be ruled by only one man. Therefore, he set up a tetrarchy – a committee of four rulers, each one of whom had a responsibility for a particular area of the empire. Diocletian established dyarchy (rule of two) by appointing Maximian as co-emperor (Caesar [junior emperor] in 286 and Augustus in 288). Later in 293 he appointed Galerius and Constantius Chlorus as Caesars. In 305, both Diocletian and Maximian abdicated the post and the two Caesars were promoted to Augustus post, and in addition two new Caesars Constantius and Maximinus were appointed. Thus, the second tetrarchy was created.

1.10.3 Constantine I

With the abdication of Diocletian, the tetrarchy collapsed and disorder once again broke out. But order was eventually restored by Constantine I (306-337 CE) who came to power, after defeating his rival army commanders. 309-313 was the period when almost all claimants to power got eliminated. In 310, Maximian and in 313 Maximinus committed suicide leaving only two emperors – Constantine in the west and Licinius in the east. Thus, the tetrarchy finally collapsed. Constantine finally succeeded in 324 by eliminating Licinius, and reunited the east and west and declared himself the sole Augustus. He decided to relocate the empire's capital to the east, which was far more prosperous. He rebuilt the Greek city of Byzantium on the Bosphorus, renaming it Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul in Turkey) which became the capital of the eastern parts of the Roman Empire. Thus, Constantine I completed the process of shifting the seat of the emperor to the east. With this the political role of Rome came to an end. He also repudiated Rome's pagan and republican traditions and converted to Christianity (For further details on growth of Christianity in the Roman Empire, see **Unit 4** of this Course). The East entered the 'Byzantine' phase in its civilisation and after the loss of the West, saw itself as the chief heir to the cultural legacy of ancient Greece and Rome.

1.11 DECLINE OF THE EMPIRE

The final collapse of the empire in the West was gradual. The Empire was overrun by the Germanic tribes (the Franks conquered Gaul, the Anglo-Saxons occupied England, and the Lombards established their power over Rome). In 476 CE the last emperor in the West was removed by a barbarian chief. The fall of Rome and the western empire is traditionally seen as an end of more than a millennium of Roman history (for details see **Unit 4** of this Course).

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) Examine in about 50 words the factors that led to the decline of the Republic and the rise of Augustus Caesar.

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- 2) How did Augustus Caesar through his reforms inaugurate a new era of peace, stability and prosperity?

- 3) What led to a crisis in the Roman Empire during 3rd century CE? How far were emperors Diocletian and Constantine I able to re-stabilize the empire?

- 4) Which of the following statements are true (T) or false (F) ? Put T or F against them.

- a) Etruscans had a profound influence on the early development of Rome. (T/F)
- b) The struggle between the Patricians and Plebeians led to a decline in the power of Senate. (T/F)
- c) The Roman wars of expansion on the one hand led to an enormous increase in the power and wealth of Senatorial aristocracy but on the other hand led to a sharp decline of the peasantry. (T/F)
- d) The reforms of Augustus Caesar led to a sharpening of civil strife in Rome. (T/F)
- e) The Roman empire in the west collapsed as the final blow was struck by the Germanic tribes. (T/F)

1.12 SUMMARY

The Roman Empire provided the crucial link between the ancient and medieval traditions. It experienced the monarchy, republic to being a strong empire. This was also the period when Christianity entered the Roman empire and gradually spread its wings across Europe (which is discussed in **Unit 3** of this Course). The political participation of people (though confined to 'citizens' only) in the governing and law-making of the state put Roman traditions on high pedestal. The establishment of '*Pax Romana*' under the aegis of Augustus established Roman supremacy across the Mediterranean. However, constant attacks of the Germanic hordes led to the demise of the Western Roman Empire, though the Eastern Roman Empire did linger around till as late as 1453.

1.14 KEYWORDS

<i>Assidui</i>	: Peasants with small-landholdings
<i>Equites</i>	: Newly enriched members of the Plebeian class

Byzantine Empire	: Eastern Roman Empire
Consuls	: Two supreme Magistrates
Latifundia	: Huge tracts of land where groups of slaves were employed
Patrician	: Hereditary nobility
Pax Romana	: Long period of peace and stability lasting around 200 years which was inaugurated by Augustus' reforms
Plebeian	: Common citizens
Proletarii	: Citizens without any property
Senatorial aristocracy	: Members of the Senate belonging to the Patrician class
Tribal Assembly	: An assembly consisting only of Plebeians
Tribunes	: Officers (two in number) elected by the Tribal Assembly who were expected to protect the Plebeians from the oppression of the rich.

1.14 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) See Section 1.2
- 2) See Section 1.3
- 3) See Section 1.3
- 4) See Section 1.4
- 5) See Section 1.5

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) See Section 1.7
- 2) See Section 1.8
- 3) See Section 1.10
- 4) a) T, b) F, c) T, d) F, e) T

1.15 SUGGESTED READINGS

Anderson, Perry, (2000) (Reprint) *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London and New York: Verso Classics).

Burns, Edward Macnall and Ralph, Philip Lee, (1991) *World Civilizations* (New York: Norton).

Farooqui, Amar, (2001) *Early Social Formations* (New Delhi: Manak Publications).

Kagan, Donald, Ozment, Steven, Frank, Alison and Turner, Frank M., (2013) *The*

1.16 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO

RECCOMENDATIONS

Ancient Rome 101: National Geographic

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXoEpNjgKzg>

The Roman Empire – Episode 1: The Rise of the Roman Empire

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZx7Rr3iVvc>

