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**The  
Roman  
Empire**

The last hundred years of the Roman Republic was a period of chaos and upheaval. Generals marched their troops on the city of Rome demanding power, there were civil wars and assassinations. In 31 BCE, Octavian (31 BCE–14 CE), the grandnephew and heir of Julius Caesar, defeated Mark Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium.<sup>1</sup> Within a year, Antony had committed suicide, leaving Octavian as the de facto leader of the Roman state. These events are traditionally regarded as inaugurating the Roman Empire. With few exceptions, Octavian and his successors for the next two centuries oversaw a period of internal peace, economic growth, and territorial expansion. The third century, however, was one of civil war, plague, economic chaos, and invasion. The empire might have collapsed in this period without the leadership of Diocletian (284–305) and Constantine (306–37).

### POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

Octavian, also known as Augustus, was an excellent politician. Since the Romans had an almost fanatical suspicion of monarchy, he understood the need to keep the trappings of the Republic. Therefore, he voluntarily submitted to the senate, which, in turn, awarded him with multiple titles. All of these political offices had existed in the Republic (consul, tribune, pontifex maximus, and so on), but they were not to be held by the same person or for multiple years in a row. These powers gave Augustus authority over most of the provinces, placed him in control of the military, allowed him to veto decisions made by other magistrates, and granted him the right to decree laws. He was careful not to flaunt his power or insult the senate. He also ensured that the elites were still able to exercise some political ambition by maintaining many elected political positions.

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<sup>1</sup> Dates associated with political leaders refer to their years in power, except where otherwise noted.

Since the government maintained a Republican façade, succession was a problem. There was no traditional way to designate the heir of the emperor because this position had not existed. It became the custom that during the emperor's lifetime, he would identify his successor by granting him certain powers and authority. Then, upon the emperor's death, the senate would grant all the offices and powers to the new emperor. The first five emperors were all members of Augustus's extended family. After the death of Nero in 68 CE, the empire did witness a brief period of civil war until Vespasian (69–79) became ruler. He was followed by his two sons, Titus (79–81) and Domitian (81–96). Next was the period of the “Five Good Emperors” (96–180). Each of these men adopted their chosen heir as an adult, ensuring that the succession fell to a capable candidate. The string of successes was broken when Marcus Aurelius (161–80) appointed his actual son, Commodus (180–92), as heir. He was not a skillful ruler and was assassinated in 192.

By 140, there were thirty-two provinces in the Roman Empire. Twenty-two of these were under the control of the emperor, who appointed the governors. The remaining ten had governors from the senatorial aristocracy. The emperors enacted policies to reform provincial administration. From the time of Augustus, governors received a salary and normally held terms of at least three years in an attempt to reduce the temptation for them to use the provinces for their personal gain. In addition, Roman citizens could appeal to the emperor if they felt their governor was excessively corrupt.

## **ECONOMICS AND URBAN LIFE**

Provinces were important for imperial revenue. After a territory was organized as a province, a census would be taken to ascertain



**The Roman Empire**  
**218 BCE**



**The Roman Empire**  
**100 BCE**



**The Roman Empire  
44 BCE**



**The Roman Empire  
14 CE**



**The Roman Empire**  
**54 CE**





**The Roman Empire (largest extent)**  
**116 CE**

the population and assets of the territory. Once this was done, property and poll taxes could be imposed. There were also minimal sales taxes (approximately 1 to 1.5 percent). Roman citizens were liable for an inheritance tax that was used to fund the military. Of course, in times of crisis, the governor could assess additional taxes as needed.

When Augustus came to power, he used significant amounts of his own money for public works that not only repaired cities, but also provided needed jobs. Under the empire, thousands of miles of high-quality paved roads were built. While originally designed for the military, they also led to economic growth, as empire-wide trade was much easier with excellent roads.

The city was considered the focus of Roman civilization. In the West, new towns followed the establishment of military garrisons or land being given to retired veterans. Many elites had rural villas, but they were expected to participate in civic life by holding elected offices, paying for public works and entertainment, and taking part in civic cults. A city was also a place where those from different social classes interacted in close quarters. Small business owners and poorer citizens lived in multi-story apartment buildings while the wealthy occupied urban villas. Roman engineering provided fresh water, sewage systems, and paved roads that allowed large towns to grow to over 250,000 people, with the city of Rome probably having a population near one million.

## **CULTURE AND RELIGION**

In Roman culture, the family was regarded as the core of society. The father of the family (*paterfamilias*) legally had control over even his adult children, who in turn were expected to obey their parents. Loyalty to the state was seen as an extension of