

BHIC-104

Social Formations and Cultural Patterns of the Medieval World



“ शिक्षा मानव को बन्धनों से मुक्त करती है और आज के युग में तो यह लोकतंत्र की भावना का आधार भी है। जन्म तथा अन्य कारणों से उत्पन्न जाति एवं वर्गगत विषमताओं को दूर करते हुए मनुष्य को इन सबसे ऊपर उठाती है।”

–इन्दिरा गांधी

“ Education is a liberating force, and in our age it is also a democratising force, cutting across the barriers of caste and class, smoothing out inequalities imposed by birth and other circumstances.”

– Indira Gandhi



**SOCIAL FORMATIONS AND CULTURAL
PATTERNS OF THE MEDIEVAL WORLD**

**School of Social Sciences
Indira Gandhi National Open University**

EXPERT COMMITTEE

Prof. Darvesh Gopal
Director
School of Social Sciences
IGNOU, New Delhi

Prof. P. K. Basant
Department of History and Culture
Jamia Millia Islamia
New Delhi

Prof. I. H. Siddiqui
Professor of History (Retd.)
Aligarh Muslim University
Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh

Prof. S. M. Azizuddin
Department of History and Culture
Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

Dr. Nalini Taneja
Campus of Open Learning
University of Delhi, Delhi

Dr. Sangeeta Pandey
Faculty of History
School of Social Sciences
IGNOU, New Delhi

Prof. Abha Singh
Faculty of History
School of Social Sciences
IGNOU, New Delhi

Prof. A.R. Khan (*Convener*)
Faculty of History
School of Social Sciences
IGNOU, New Delhi

Course Coordinator : Prof. Abha Singh

General Editor : Prof. A.R. Khan

COURSE TEAM

Prof. Abha Singh

Dr. Divya Sethi

Dr. Priyanka Khanna

COURSE PREPARATION TEAM

Unit No. Course Writer

1. Dr. Promilla Srivastava
Daulat Ram College
University of Delhi, Delhi
3. Prof. Denys P. Leighton
School of Liberal Studies
Ambedkar University, New Delhi
5. Dr. Nalini Taneja
School of Open Learning
University of Delhi, Delhi
7. Prof. Denys P. Leighton
School of Liberal Studies
Ambedkar University, Delhi
9. Prof. Sushil Chaudhury
Fellow, Royal Historical Society, England and
Dr. Amrit Kaur Basra
Delhi College of Arts & Commerce
University of Delhi, Delhi
11. Dr. Debarpita Manjit
Dyal Singh College
University of Delhi, New Delhi
13. Dr. Samana Zafar
Department of History and Culture
Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi
15. Mr. Shakir-ul Hassan
Department of History and Culture
Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

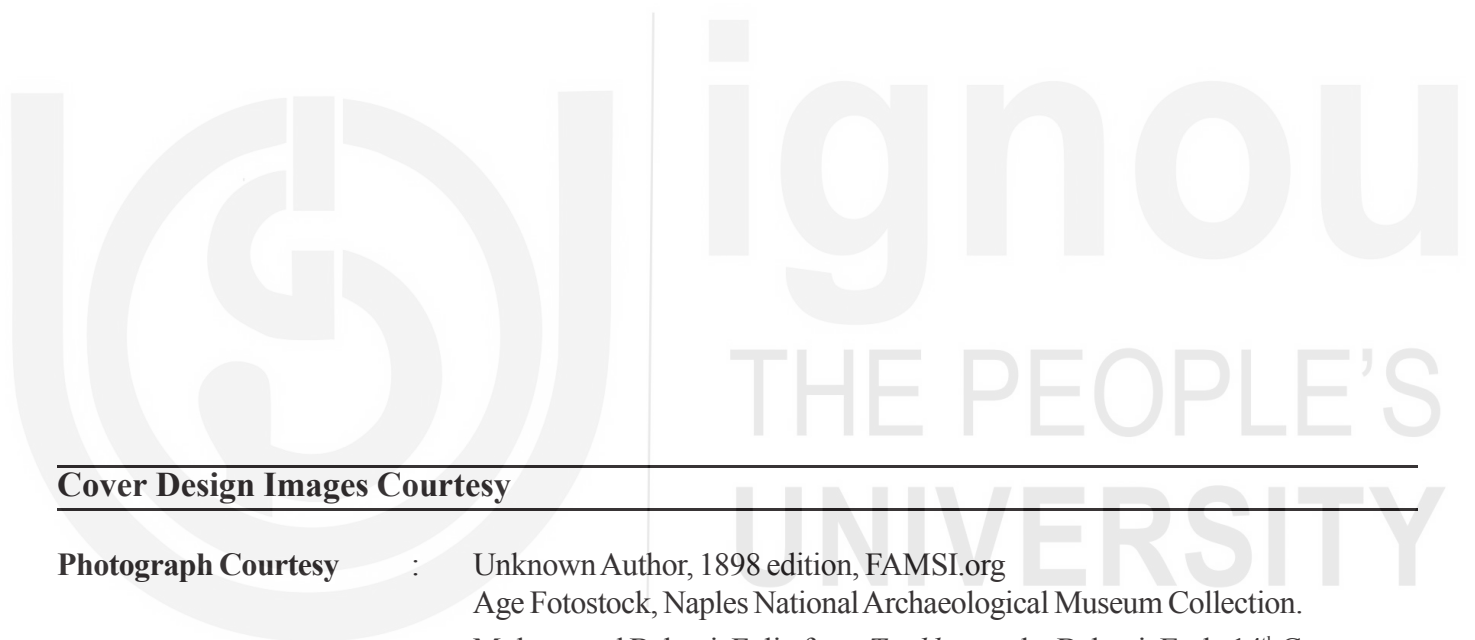
Unit No. Course Writer

2. Dr. Promilla Srivastava
Daulat Ram College
University of Delhi, Delhi
 4. Dr. Deeksha Bhardwaj
Gargi College
University of Delhi, Delhi
 6. Prof. Harbans Mukhia and
Dr. Bodhisattva Car
Centre for Historical Studies, JNU
New Delhi
 8. Dr. Amrit Kaur Basra
Delhi College of Arts & Commerce
University of Delhi, New Delhi
 10. Dr. Debarpita Manjit
Dyal Singh College
University of Delhi, New Delhi
 12. Dr. Chandni Sengupta
Amity University
Gurugram, Haryana
 14. Mr. Shakir-ul Hassan
Department of History and Culture
Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi
 16. Dr. Samer Moiz Rizvi
Department of History and Culture
Jamia Milia Islamia, New Delhi
-

CONTENT, FORMAT AND LANGUAGE EDITING

Prof. Abha Singh
Faculty of History
School of Social Sciences
IGNOU, New Delhi

Dr. Divya Sethi
Consultant
Faculty of History
School of Social Sciences
IGNOU, New Delhi



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Sh. Yashpal
Section Officer (Pub.)
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Ms. Arvinder Chawla
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Guidelines for Study of the Course

In this Course we have followed a uniform pattern for presenting the learning material. This starts with an introduction to the Course underlining the significant developments in chronological order and covers 4 major themes with coverage of 16 sub-themes or Units. For the convenience of study, all the Units have been presented with a uniform structure. Objectives as the first section of the Unit have been included to help you find what are you expected to learn from the study of the Unit. Please go through these objectives carefully and keep reflecting and checking them after studying a few sections of the Unit. Introduction of the Unit introduces you to the subject area covered and guides you to the way subject matter is presented. These are followed by the main subject area discussed through sections and sub-sections for ease of comprehension. In between the text, some check your progress exercises have been provided. We advise you to attempt these as and when you reach them. These will help you assess your study and test your comprehension of the subject studied. Compare your answers with the answer guidelines provided after the summary. The keywords and unfamiliar terms have been provided at the end of each Unit, which have been marked in bold in the text. At the end of each Unit under Suggested Readings we have also provided a list of books and references. These include sources and books which are useful or have been consulted for developing the material for the concerned Unit. You should try to study them. We have also included instructional videos for an enhanced understanding by the students. Please try to watch these videos, they will help you in understanding and learning the subject matter in an all-inclusive manner.

COURSE INTRODUCTION

The present Course begins (**Theme I**) with the establishment of the Roman empire. Roman empire was unique in the sense that it saw the transitions from the Roman kingdoms to republic to an empire. The *Pax Romana*, a state of tranquility throughout the Mediterranean world established by Augustus I (27 BCE-14 CE) lasted for almost two hundred years (till the time of Marcus Aurelius; 161-180 CE) and Rome prospered. The concord even extended to the North Africa and Persia. Roman emperors protected and governed provinces, administered Roman laws and justice across the region. Roman *Twelve Tables* saw the transition and Roman Law got standardized (**Units 1-2**). Towards the close of the 4th century CE Roman empire breaks into two halves — the Western and the Eastern. The Western empire fell in 476 CE while the Eastern empire more commonly known as Byzantine empire lingered for another twelve hundred years when in the year 1453 Constantinople finally fell to the Ottomans. On religious front also radical changes occurred. From Augustus I's period onwards Roman emperors looked upon as god/worshipped as gods. Tiberius's reign (14-37 CE) saw the crucifixion of the Christ and continued the torturing/killings of Christians until in the reign of Constantine I (312-337). The reign of Constantine heralded a new era in the history of the Roman Church when in 313 CE The Edict of Toleration/The Edict of Milan declared the Roman Church as legal religion. By fourth century CE Christianity became the state religion of Rome. The fall of the Western Roman empire (476) was again a turning point. The weak Roman power paved the way for the dominance of the Papal Church and the Holy Roman Empire. The church emerged as the only institution upholding order, particularly in the wake of constant Barbarian attacks. Another turning point in the history of Christianity comes in 1054 with the break from the Eastern Churches. During the period from the 11th century till the Reformation Papal authority reigned supreme. However, by the turn of the fifteenth century heresy, corruption and finally conciliarism took the toll on the Church and Papacy failed to effectively rule or reform itself, resulted in the decline of Pope's powers and led to the era of reformation which followed in the fifteenth-sixteenth centuries under the leaderships of Luther, Calvin and Zwingli — all vehemently attacked the church and questioned the lack of spiritual vitality of the Church (**Units 3 and 7**).

Theodosius' death (395) marked the beginning of the parcelization of the Roman empire into two halves the Eastern and the Western, thus heralded the beginning of the crisis (**Unit 4**). West got shaken in 410 when Rome was sacked by Visigoths, a Germanic hoard. The fall of the Western Roman empire completed the full circle in 476 when the Germanic chief Odoacer deposed the last Roman emperor of the West, Romulus Augustulus. Characteristically, Rome was not distinguished for its vastness and army, but for its intellectual accomplishments — Roman Law (the Justinian Codes), Roman network of roads, high standards of city planning, hygiene and sewage disposal, dams, aqueducts, architecture, Roman baths and above all for its legacy of Latin language (Cicero's speeches, Terence's dramas, Virgil's poetry).

The crisis of the Roman empire heralded the onset of the Middle Age in Europe and the chief feature of this phase was 'feudalism' which forms **Theme II** of our Course. The medieval world in the context of Western Europe is generally been seen as synonymous with feudalism. Beginning with Marc Bloch's *Feudal Society* scholars have looked the medieval society as that of degeneration and decline in all walks of life, decline in the craft production and trade, particularly the long distance trade, what Henry Pirenne calls an 'economic retrogression' is considered to be the hallmark of the medieval world. The Mediterranean no longer functioned as 'channel of intellectual and commercial

communication'; 'exchange economy' substituted by the 'economy without markets', which Pirenne calls the stage of 'commercial paralysis'. Pirenne's study was a breakthrough. However, historians like Robert Lopez, Francois-Louis Ganshof, M. Sabbe, Perry Anderson, etc. do not believe that the rise of Islam was so 'decisive' a factor on the developments in Europe. Georges Duby speaks about the Feudal Revolution from 1000 CE onwards in Europe. However, the debate on feudalism is far from closed and feudalism could be described as heterogeneous phenomenon and represented diverse social realities in the medieval Europe.

Theme III covers three major aspects of the medieval world. The foremost is the religion and culture in the medieval Europe (**Unit 7**). The second theme looks into the development of crafts, industries and trade in the medieval Europe (**Units 8 and 9**). The third theme covers the patterns of state formations in Africa. It also takes into account the state formations in the New World and covers the medieval civilizations of Latin America — the Aztecs and the Incas. In the case of medieval Africa the new religious ideology, i.e. Islam, that shook the entire Western Europe, equally felt in Africa. The formation of the first major state empires in Africa (Morocco and Sudan), was the Islamic state of Almoravids, under the leadership of Ibn Yasin, a Malikist who emphasized upon the establishment of 'pure' Islam. However, by twelfth century under al-Ghazali Sufism gained ground and *fuqahas* (jurists) were heavily condemned (**Unit 10**). To study the Latin American state structures interestingly one does not find a single integrated system approach in the Inca structures, instead one can see there a 'sense of overlapping networks'. The huge set of sacred places spread across Inca territories were hardly part of the central political network. Incas spoke three major languages — the Quechua (Chinch Quechua) was almost the lingua franca. The recording through *Khipu* knots restricted their ability to construct history. Thus dating in Inca history is often a problem. Incas also do not seem to have calculating time in terms of accumulating years, though annual cycles were carefully recorded by them. Unlike the Aztecs, Incas left no canons to be encoded except *Khipu* so it is difficult to conjecture their moral behaviours and ideas, knowledge systems, instead they learnt and were governed by daily moral experiences that were transmitted through practice across generations. However, specific elites like *Amauta* (philosopher, wise man) did appear to have special impact. The masters of knot-record (*Khipu-Kamayug*) were other wise men. However, high levels of hydraulic engineering, network of roads suggests the presence of some select individuals/groups who accomplished such wonders. The knowledgeable healers were other groups present. Against this background the **Units 10 and 11** attempt to unearth the society, polity and economy of these Latin American pre-colonial civilizations.

Theme IV deals exclusively on the formation of the Islamic world. There are multiple approaches to study the rise of Islam. The most traditional approach views rise of Islam in the context of 'history of religion'. They perceive Islam operating in a specific area, by a specific ethnic group. Another approach is to study Islam as a social and political movement. They look rise of Islam as a tool for 'political legitimacy' and a means of 'mass mobilisation'. Others contemplate spread of knowledge through its network of religious schools and colleges as the crucial component of spread of Islam. Marshall Hodgson viewed 'disparate Muslim communities as part of larger Islamic civilization'. Traditionally, our understanding is that the Arabs 'originate as Bedouins' and identify Bedouins with primitivism and view Arabs as single monolithic demographic zone. Arab imaginaries are largely identified with pastoral-nomadism, a narrative that lacked 'change and development' and the rise of Islam was associated with the beginning of a 'real History' of the Arabs. We need to better understand the trajectory of pre-Islamic Arabia as 'heterogeneous' not a 'homogeneous' identity. Prior to the rise of Islam, Arab identity as a cohesive group was too fragmented. The rise of Islam reformulated the identity of

the Arabs. Following the death of its founder Prophet Muhammad (632) Islam faced series of internal and external challenges, including the challenge pertaining to the leadership of the *Umma* (Islamic community). After the initial consolidation of Islamic power under the four Pious Caliphs the Arab-Islamic state fell into the hands of the Umayyads and the Abbasids. It was during this period that the powerful empires of the Byzantine and the Persianate were uprooted and wings of Islam spread over Syria, Iraq, Egypt and Andulasia (southern Spain). This brought the Christian and the Islamic World in open confrontation. To the *jihad* war cry Pope declared 'Holy War' in the famous Council of Clemont, brought the entire Middle East, North Africa and the West up in arms which led to the long drawn 'Crusades' that shook the entire medieval Europe. The rise of Islam, thus, can not be studied in isolation, one need to keep in mind the multiple developments happening during that period across the world. **Theme IV** attempts to integrate and narrate all these developments taking place between 7th to 13th centuries.



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Theme I

Roman Republic

Time Line

Roman Kingdom: 753-509 CE

Foundation of the City of Rome: 753 CE

Roman Republic: 509-27 BCE

Early Republic: 509-146 BCE

Late Republic: 146-27 BCE

The Principate/Age of Empire: 27 BCE-284 CE

Octavian/Augustus I: 27 BCE-14 CE

Nero: 54-68 CE

Trajan: 98-107 CE

Late Roman Empire: 284-476 CE

Diocletian: 284-305 CE

Constantine I: 306-337 CE

Christianity in Rome

Conversion of Constantine I: 312 CE

Official Religion of Rome: 380 CE

Western Roman Empire: 395-476 CE

Eastern Roman Empire: 395-1453 CE



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Photograph: An ancient Roman wall painting in Room 71 of the House of Marcus Fabius Rufus at Pompeii, Italy, showing Venus with a cupid's arms wrapped around her. It is most likely a depiction of Cleopatra VII of Ptolemaic Egypt as Venus Genetrix, with her son Caesarion as a cupid. It was most likely painted in conjunction with the September 46 BCE foundation of the Temple of Venus Genetrix in the Forum Iulium (i.e. Forum of Caesar) by Julius Caesar, where he erected a gilded statue depicting Queen Cleopatra (as described by Appian in his 2nd-century CE *Bella Civilia*). Circa 46 BCE by Ancient Roman Painters

Courtesy: Pinterest

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fe/Venus_and_Cupid_from_the_House_of_Marcus_Fabius_Rufus_at_Pompeii%2C_most_likely_a_depiction_of_Cleopatra_VII_%282%29.jpg

UNIT 1 ROMAN EMPIRE: POLITICAL SYSTEM*

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Early History of Rome
- 1.3 Establishment of Roman Republic and Military Expansion
 - 1.3.1 First Phase of the Conquest
 - 1.3.2 Second Phase of the Conquest
- 1.4 Political Structure of the Roman Republic
 - 1.4.1 The Senate
 - 1.4.2 The Magistrates
 - 1.4.3 The People
 - 1.4.4 The Assembly
- 1.5 Political Struggle between the Orders
 - 1.5.1 First Phase of the Conflict and Changes in the Constitution
 - 1.5.2 Second Phase of the conflict
- 1.6 Reforms of the Gracchi Brothers
 - 1.6.1 Decline of the Peasantry or ‘Assidui Class’
 - 1.6.2 Growing Discontent among the Soldiers
 - 1.6.3 Role of Urban Poor in the Growing Unrest
- 1.7 The Last Century of the Republic and the Rise of Successful Military Commanders
 - 1.7.1 First ‘Triumvirate’
 - 1.7.2 Second ‘Triumvirate’
- 1.8 The Augustan Age
 - 1.8.1 Political and Constitutional Reforms
 - 1.8.2 Administrative Reforms
 - 1.8.3 Reforms in the Army
 - 1.8.4 Social and Economic Reforms
- 1.9 Extent of the Early Empire
- 1.10 Late Empire
 - 1.10.1 Third Century CE and Political Instability
 - 1.10.2 Diocletian and Measures taken to Re-stabilise the Empire
 - 1.10.3 Constantine I
- 1.11 Decline of the Empire
- 1.12 Summary
- 1.13 Keywords
- 1.14 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 1.15 Suggested Readings
- 1.16 Instructional Video Recommendations

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 (64-17BCE) 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

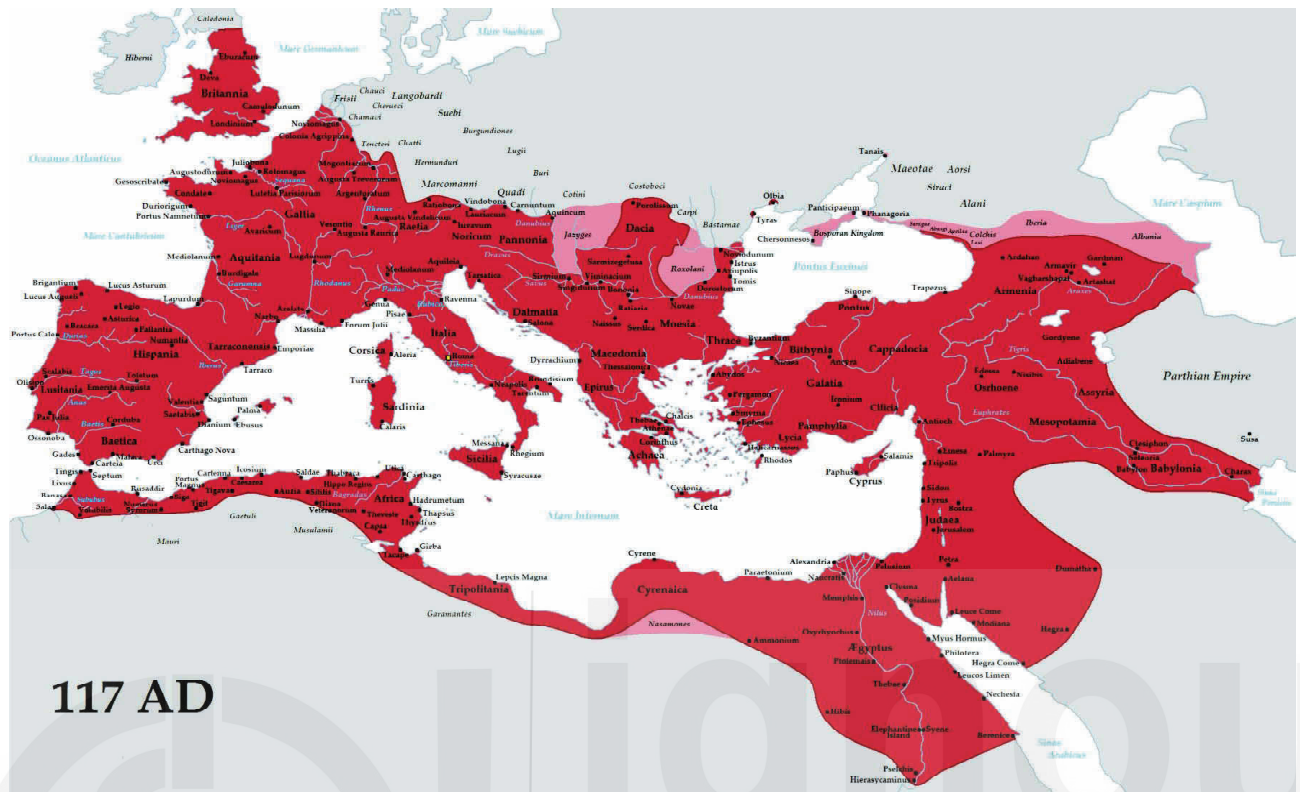
After controlling Italy, Rome moved to become the master of the Mediterranean world (264 -133 BCE). By the middle of the third century BCE, the Republic had embarked on a series of military exploits known as Punic wars². These wars were fought against Carthage, which was a colony founded by Phoenicia 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.

Roman Republic

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 *Comiata* 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:Sarcofago_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 *decoviri* (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 Tribunate 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 led 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

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 upto 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?

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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?

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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

- Assidui* : Peasants with small-landholdings
- Equites* : 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>



UNIT 2 ROMAN EMPIRE: ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE*

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Nature of Economy
 - 2.2.1 Economy Under the Republic
 - 2.2.2 Structure of Economy Under the Principate
 - 2.2.3 Slave Mode of Production and the Crisis
 - 2.2.4 Decline of Slave Economy and the Rise of Colonate System
- 2.3 Social Structure
 - 2.3.1 Traditional Division of Society
 - 2.3.2 Struggle of the 'Orders'
 - 2.3.3 Growth of the Roman Empire and Transformation of Society
 - 2.3.4 Social Stratification Under the Principate
- 2.4 Slavery and Society
- 2.5 Roman Art and Architecture
- 2.6 Summary
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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The central theme of this Unit is the study of the economic and social structure of Rome from Early Republic to the Principate and the Late Empire. After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- understand how wars and conflicts for expansion brought about far-reaching changes in the Roman society and economy,
- know about the emergence of the new rural institution of *Latifundia*,
- understand the main features of the slave mode of production,
- learn the process of the transformation of Roman society,
- analyze the Roman social formations based on slavery, and
- appreciate the finer aspects of Roman art and architecture.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Ancient Rome was primarily an agrarian and slave-based economy. Agriculture and trade were the dominant sectors of economy, supplemented only by small-scale industrial

* Dr. Promilla Srivastava, Daulat Ram College, University of Delhi, Delhi

production. The society was dominated by the notions of class and status. Large-scale use of slave labour was one of the most significant features of the late Republic. Beginning from the first century CE the Senate lost its powers and gradually the monarchy got established. New taxation system was introduced and the role of different classes in the economy also got transformed. The slaves were permanently settled by the landlords on their estates and they were given small plots to look after themselves. Though, slavery did not disappear altogether, the changes in varied aspects of Roman society had far reaching consequences on the history of Europe and Asia in the early middle age. According to an estimate while around 225 BCE there were 600,000 slaves in Roman Italy, they swelled to 20 lakhs by 31 BCE.

For the study of economic and social structure of ancient Rome, this Unit has been divided into three main periods of Roman history: Republic (509-27 BCE), Principate (27 BCE-284 CE) and Late Empire (284-476 CE). The key aspects of society and economy of each period have been examined in detail.

2.2 NATURE OF ECONOMY

The Roman civilization of the Ancient World, which left a deep impact on the subsequent civilizations of the West, was based on cities. These cities derived their wealth from the surplus extracted from the countryside. Behind this urban culture and polity lay the rural economy, agriculture remained the dominant factor in the economy and towns invariably drew their wealth from the countryside.

2.2.1 Economy Under the Republic

Land was the principal source of wealth in the Roman empire throughout its history. Vast tracts of land were used for cultivation of cereals and other agricultural products, especially those of olives and wine, and also served as pastures for cattle, sheep and horses. The 'Twelve Tables' suggest a largely agricultural way of life in Rome in the 5th century BCE. Agriculture was to remain the essential basis of Roman activity, generally through the smallholders working their land. Arable farming and viticulture were more common than the activity of stock-raising. The towns were never the main centres of manufacturers, traders or craftsmen. They were centres where powerful landowning classes lived and derived their income from corn, oil and wine produced in estates and farms situated outside the cities. These landowners were largely absentee landlords. This was possible because of the existence of slave-labour in the countryside which provided wealth and leisure to the ruling landowning class that thrived in the cities.

Slave Economy

Slavery had existed early in Rome but only during the classical period (2nd century BCE to 2nd century CE), it was a huge and massive institution, though other labour forms – free tenants, dependent tenants and urban artisans – also existed. However the dominant mode of production was based on slavery. According to Perry Anderson, slavery was the economic hinge that joined the town and country together and provided for the huge profits of the ruling class. The traditional structure of the Italian economy was transformed by the wars fought for mastery of the Mediterranean world. Two aspects of the transformation of the Italian economy stand out: first, the increase in the wealth of the Roman elite, and second the massive growth of slavery.

The importance of industry and manufacturing was small as compared to agriculture. Manufacture was carried on a small scale, conducted usually by individuals or

small groups making items for everyday use such as bricks, tiles and pots or leather products and cloths.

According to Hopkins (1978) seven processes affected the growth of slavery in Rome: (1) continuous war, (2) the influx of booty, (3) its investment in land, (4) the formation of large estates, (5) the impoverishment of peasants, (6) their emigration to towns or provinces, and (7) the growth of urban markets. All these processes were interwoven. M.I. Finley (1980) holds the view that slavery becomes widespread in the economy when two conditions are present. First, when the internal supply of labour in a given society is severely deficient in relation to its demand for labour. Secondly, when there is considerable landed property in the hands of a small class. Early in the Republic (326 BCE), the legal use of debt bondage had been abolished. However, rural indebtedness led to the concentration of landed property in the hands of the nobility. With the abolition of debt bondage, there was no bonded labour force available at the hands of big landlords. Slavery came to provide the manpower for their estates. Moreover, improved farming methods learned from Greeks and Carthaginians encouraged rich aristocrats to buy more and more land. Abandoning the cultivation of grain, they introduced large-scale production of olive oil and wine, or raising of sheep and cattle. This change was especially profitable because of the huge supply of war-prisoners from the conquered land to work as slaves on the estates. These large plantations, based on slave labour, called '*Latifundia*' were now common in many parts of Italy.

The *Latifundia* that emerged as a result of Roman warfare transformed the economy. The supply of slaves was obtained through the wars of conquest, although banditry and piracy were also important sources of slave supply. These *Latifundia* did not always form consolidated blocks of land, farmed as single units. The typical pattern was for the *Latifundist* to possess a large number of medium-sized **villa** estates, sometimes contiguous but often distributed across the country. Even the management functions were delegated to slave supervisors and *bailiffs*, who were responsible for putting slave gangs in the fields while the *Latifundists* lived in the cities. Even the dispersed holdings of *Latifundists* were remarkably larger than their Greek predecessors, often exceeding 300 acres in extent, while the consolidated estates like the younger Pliny's seat in Tuscany might be 3000 acres or more in size. According to Perry Anderson, rise of the Italian *Latifundia* led to a great extension of pastoral ranching and the intercropping of vine and olives with cereal cultivation.

The rural slave *Latifundium* developed by the Roman Republic also penetrated the colonies founded by it in the Western Mediterranean region. The river routes of Spain or Gaul assisted this penetration. With more land for Romans there came other developments in the field of farming. Although cereal production in Italy continued to be important and was necessary for subsistence, more cash crops like olives and vines were planted, though these tended to benefit the rich, since these take years to produce fruit.

As Perry Anderson mentions, Spain and Gaul remained with Italy, the Roman provinces were deeply marked by slavery down to the final end of the Empire. Towns were established by the Romans in the Western Mediterranean region which were built along the banks of navigable rivers. Although these towns were not many in number as the Eastern Mediterranean region, they were much larger than those founded by Rome in the East. In Rome, by the Late Republic the influx of slave labour, to an extent, not only transformed agriculture but industry and trade were also overwhelmingly transformed by it. According to an estimate of P.A. Brunt, perhaps 90 per cent artisans in Rome itself were of slave origin. Those involved in manufacture now had more opportunities.

Trade and Industry

Early Rome was not a major centre of international trade such as the city-states of Athens or Carthage or some of the wealthier Etruscan cities in the north. Trade mainly catered to the local markets and dealt in local produce. Trade was initially linked to essential items or a few luxury goods for the well-off classes in society. Merchants were not held in great respect, though with the passage of time, many of them became very rich (equestrian class) but still were not accepted as equals by the landholding class. Although a monetary system was in operation, transactions were done in bronze, measured by weight. Coins were probably not issued until 300 BCE. The problem of land transport was a serious constraint in the field of trade and commerce. Main roads were relatively few and were initially built for military use, and even along a paved route movement by cart was slow and the carrying power of animals limited. On the other hand, transportation through the medium of ships in the Mediterranean was much cheaper although it required considerable initial investment. Moving goods by navigable rivers was important, though often carried on a small scale.

The largest industry in ancient Rome was that of mining which provided stones for enormous building projects and metals for tools and weapons required for the conquest of the Mediterranean world. Greece and Italy provided marble for buildings that have been admired by the ancient and modern people alike. In Spain, large quantities of gold and silver were used for minting coins and making jewellery. In Britain, mines produced iron, lead and tin for weapons. Although most work was done by slaves and **freedmen** (slaves who had been set free), but free labour was also available.

2.2.2 Structure of Economy Under the Principate

The economy of the Early Empire remained basically agrarian and the huge estates, *Latifundia*, prospered. The age of Augustus was known as the Golden Age in Roman history. The unification of the Mediterranean improved the governance and facilitated economic expansion. The economy continued to be based on slavery. Agricultural and artisanal production techniques also improved. For example, screw presses promoted oil production, kneading machines facilitated the manufacture of bread, glass-blowing became widespread. The Dacian kingdom (106 BCE-106 CE) was conquered and its gold mines annexed.

Rome's unification of the ancient world had far-reaching economic consequences. During the Principate (1st and 2nd centuries CE) great expansion of trade and commerce took place. This was due to a number of factors. Firstly, the *Pax Romana* was responsible for the elimination of tolls and other artificial barriers. Secondly, it also led to the suppression of piracy and brigandage, and thirdly, reliable coinage was now established. In addition, the West witnessed the longest period of peace which promoted trade and commerce. Industry also registered some growth but its expansion was hindered by the fact that wealth remained concentrated in the hands of the ruling class and no mass market for industrial goods developed.

The empire's rapidly expanding economy enabled Augustus to fund a vast, popular programme of public works – theatre of Marcellus, Curia Julia (Senate House), Claminian Cricus, Cricus Maximus, and also doubled the water capacity of Aqua Marcia along with three aqueducts – Julia, Virgo and Alsotiva. Augustus used to say that 'he found Rome a city of brick, and left it a city of marble'. An ambitious building programme was launched which provided considerable employment to the plebeian class. The practice of distributing corn to the poor citizens was continued which also came to include wine and oil by the end of the 2nd century CE. Economic growth continued well

into the reigns of the 'good emperors'. Internal peace and efficient administration helped in the growth of agriculture, as well as trade and industry, by making it easier to market products at a distance. Small farms continued to exist, but more and more large estates, managed by absentee owners and growing cash crops, dominated agriculture.

2.2.3 Slave Mode of Production and the Crisis

According to Perry Anderson, the slave mode of production was the decisive invention of the Graeco-Roman world. If it provided the basis for the flowering of the Graeco-Roman world, it was also responsible for its decline. In Roman theory, the agricultural slave was called 'instrumentum vocale', the speaking tool; one grade away from the livestock that constituted an 'instrumentum semi-locale' and two from the implement which was an 'instrumentum mutum'. They became the standard objects of sale and purchase in the metropolitan markets. They could be shifted from one region to another and could be trained in a number of different skills. As Perry Anderson suggests, the wealth and ease of the propertied urban class of classical antiquity rested on the broad surplus produced in the countryside by slave labour.

According to some critics, slavery hindered the growth of technology. The slave had no incentive to innovate and could not be trusted with any expensive implement. Slave relations of production ultimately tended to paralyse productivity in both agriculture and industry. There were undoubtedly some technical improvements in the slave economy. They included among others the spread of more profitable wine and oil cultures (the cultivation of grapes and olives); the introduction of rotary mills for the grinding of grain; the two-field rotation system; botanical knowledge and field drainage also increased. There was, thus, no complete halt to technological development. Slave women often served as in-charge of grinding grain or cultivating the fields. In the manufacturing establishments and shops they worked as spinners, weavers and cloth makers. However, some select few who were educated worked as secretaries, clerks and readers.

But, as has been pointed out, no major cluster of inventions ever occurred to push the economy forwards. There was an overall technological stagnation in the ancient economy. The existence of a reservoir of labour capable of unlimited exploitation (which slavery was) discouraged the use of labour-saving devices. Reliance on human and animal labour conditioned Roman technology to operate within narrow limits. No labour-saving devices of any kind were ever introduced in the four centuries of its existence and 'the boundaries of the Roman agrarian economy' were soon reached and rigidly fixed.

Another factor that contributed to a crisis in the slave economy during the Empire was a sharp decline in the number of slaves and their rising prices. Traditionally, the supply of slaves largely depended on the foreign conquest since prisoners of war provided the main source of slave labour in antiquity 'with the final closure of the imperial frontiers after Trajan, the well of war captives inevitably dried up'.

The commercial trade could not make up for the shortages that resulted. The result was that prices of slaves started to rise sharply and it has been estimated that they were by the 1st and 2nd centuries CE eight to ten times the levels of the 2nd and 1st centuries BCE. This sharp rise in their prices exposed the contradictions and risks of slave labour for the owners. For the slave owner each adult slave represented a perishable capital investment which would be wiped off completely at his death. Thus, the slave-owner would now be more hesitant to purchase additional slaves.

Declining rate of reproduction was another cause of the decline in the number of slaves. The slaves were housed in prison-like conditions and few female slaves were employed because they were not so profitable to the owners. The result was a very low rate of

reproduction which would have reduced the size of the labour force over the course of time. To prevent this decline in slave numbers, some owners encouraged slave-breeding during the Principate. This might have deferred crisis in the slave economy but it did not provide any long-term solution to it. Meanwhile, the rural free population was increasing to compensate for losses in the slave sector. Thus, a crisis was already brewing in the rural economy by the end of the Principate.

Meanwhile, there was no growth in trade and industry to offset the decline in agricultural production. A population overwhelmingly made up of subsistence peasants, slave labourers and urban poor limited the scope of the market. The propertied classes maintained their traditional contempt for trade. Merchants were a despised class, frequently recruited from freedmen. Lack of interest and lack of demand both worked against technological advancement in industry and limited its scope.

The financial and political crisis added onto this decline in slavery. The Roman empire was at its peak during the first two centuries CE but by the second century CE it was clear that difficult times lay ahead. The central government took extreme measures to save the declining economy. Political stability declined along with monetary stability. While there was a significant decline in population, the cost of government, however, kept rising. An ever increasing need for money compelled the emperor to adopt the policy of increased taxation and led to inflation by debasing the coinage. The situation was precipitated by a series of attacks by the Germanic tribes on the Empire. Domestic political instability combined by ferocious attacks launched by the Germanic tribes brought other problems within the terrain. Destruction caused by war and epidemics further reduced and weakened the population. Lands were deserted and there was a sharp fall in the agricultural production. In Gaul, the exploited masses broke-out in full-scale rural uprisings (called Baccaude) and it seemed that the empire would soon collapse.

The financial crisis aggravated by the barbarian attacks led to drastic changes in the army. Inflation had forced emperor Commodus to raise the soldiers' pay and the Severan emperors (a Roman imperial dynasty) had to double it to keep up with the increasing prices. This increased the budget by as much as 25 per cent. To raise money, emperors resorted to new taxes and debased the coinage. To attract men into the army, discipline was relaxed and military service became the path to social advancement.

As emperors devoted their attention to the defence of the frontiers, they were less able to preserve internal order. Piracy, brigandage and the neglect of roads and harbours all hampered trade – as did the debasement of coinage and inflation. Small artisans and craftsmen were drifting out of the towns, seeking security and employment in the estates of big landlords, despite official decrees banning such migrations. Throughout the empire in most provinces, urban trade and industry progressively declined and many towns withered and disappeared.

2.2.4 Decline of Slave Economy and the Rise of Colonnate System

According to Perry Anderson, the final solution to the crisis which had manifested itself in the countryside was found there itself which paved the way for an altogether new mode of production. Owners now increasingly ceased to provide for the upkeep of many of their slaves directly. Instead they set them up on small plots of land to look after themselves and pay surplus produce to their landowners. At the same time, villages of small peasants and free-tenants fell under the 'patronage' of great landlords in their search for protection against fiscal exactions and conscription by the state, and came to occupy economic positions very similar to those of ex-slaves. Economic pressure, thus,

forced many members of the lower classes to become ‘**coloni**’ (tenant farmers) and coloni steadily replaced slaves as agricultural labour. ‘Coloni’ were the dependent tenant peasants tied to their landlord’s estate, and paying him either in cash or in kind for his plot, or cultivating it on a share-cropping basis. The ‘**colonus**’ (plural ‘**coloni**’) generally retained about half the yield of their plots. Thus, with formation of the colonate system, the economic importance of slavery declined but it did not disappear altogether. Slavery continued to survive in the imperial household and survived the fall of the Roman Empire.

The decline of the empire in the West proceeded rapidly in the fourth and fifth centuries CE. The Centre gradually lost its control over members of the upper classes who moved to the country and came to dominate a large class of dependent labourers. They lived in their fortified estates, called Villa, where the peasants often sought protection from both barbarian invaders and imperial officers collecting taxes. They became the victims of rich landlords and became tied to their estates. By the fifth century, the Western empire had dissolved into isolated estates belonging to rural aristocrats who dominated a large class of dependent peasantry, i.e. the ‘**coloni**’. The central government increasingly lost its ability to provide order and security to the people of the Empire. Trade and communication declined and regions became increasingly self-sufficient.

Check Your Progress-1

1) How was the Roman agrarian economy transformed by the rise of *Latifundia* ?

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2) Analyse the factors which led to the rise of slavery in Rome.

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3) Discuss the factors which led to a crisis in the slave economy in the Roman Empire.

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4) How was the Roman society transformed by the wars of expansion ?

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5) What is meant by the colonate system ? How did it lead to an increase in the power and wealth of rural aristocrats ?

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2.3 SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The Roman social structure was highly stratified. The society was divided into many classes which had their own contradictions and were in clash with each other. In this Section, we will study in detail the social orders and their struggle.

2.3.1 Traditional Division of Society

Roman tradition is unanimous in holding that there existed under the monarchy a group of families known as *Patricians*, the landowning aristocrats who served as priests, magistrates, lawyers and judges. The poorer citizens or the *Plebeians* were craftspeople, merchants, labourers and small-holders. The *Patricians* succeeded in the early years of the Republic in acquiring both a monopoly of state power and almost the complete control of resources of the community. According to sources, members of both the groups were full citizens, with the obligation to bear arms and with membership in the popular assembly. However, after the expulsion of the kings, the *Plebeians* are described as completely subordinate to the *Patricians*, who had wealth and monopolized public office.

2.3.2 Struggle of the ‘Orders’

The early Republic was a period of economic difficulties which weighed heavily on the lower orders and increased their resentment at the *Patrician* exclusiveness. At the same time, the fact that some of the lower orders (not the very poor) contributed the manpower on which the military success depended, conferred bargaining power which they were not slow to utilize. Soon there emerged a *Plebeian* movement which set out to break the *Patrician* monopoly of the state and to reduce the extent of economic exploitation of the poor by the rich – known as the *struggle* of the orders (For further details, please see Unit 1 of this Course, **Section 1.5**).

For more than two centuries after the establishment of the Republic, the *Plebeians* struggled for political and social equality threatening to secede from the city if their demands were not met. The newly enriched *Plebeians* succeeded in gaining access to one of the two consular offices from 366 BCE onwards, but it was only in 172 BCE that both Consuls were for the first time from amongst the *Plebeians*. The poorer *Plebeians* also succeeded in securing the establishment of ‘*Concilium Plebis*’ early in the fifth century BCE which was later recognized as a constitutional body called the Tribal Assembly (287 BCE) which was presided over by its own officers called ‘*Tribunes*’. However, the *Plebeian* organisation was simply grafted on the Roman state and did not lead to an end of the oligarchic rule. Aristocratic supremacy within the Republic was not seriously shaken.

The *Plebeians* in course of time secured other fundamental rights and safeguards. The 'Law of Twelve Tables' (450 BCE) provided for the codification of Civil Law, whereby the use of arbitrary exercise of judicial authority by the *Patricians* was reduced. Marriage between *Patricians* and *Plebeians* was legalized and enslavement of citizens for debt (*nexum*) was abolished by a law passed in 326 BCE.

2.3.3 Growth of the Roman Empire and Transformation of Society

The growth of Rome from a small city state to the dominant power in the Mediterranean world in less than four hundred years (509-133 BCE) profoundly affected its economic and social structure. The Roman wars of expansion led to an increase in the power and wealth of the senatorial aristocracy. But it steadily weakened the number of smallholder class. Peasant agitation for land reform had been stifled by the suppression of Gracchi brothers (See **Unit 1** of this Course, **Section 1.6**). But now their demands centered on allocations of land to discharged veterans (war-survivors, soldiers who were recruited from the Roman peasantry). Senatorial aristocracy had made enormous profits by the wars of conquest but refused to share their profits with the soldiers, The soldiers came to look up to their successful generals for economic rehabilitation and generals now started using their armies for political advancement.

The lowest order of the *plebeians* consisted of propertyless citizens (the *Proletari* class) who were artisans, labourers, and petty shopkeepers, whether slave, freedmen or free-born. In 538 BCE free grain was distributed for the first time and soon it became a permanent feature of Roman political life. In the large metropolis of Rome, without the presence of any serious police, the urban mob could exercise a lot of pressure in times of crisis and contributed to the fall of the Republic.

The Late Republic witnessed an important military development. This period, which witnessed serious political and social crisis, was also a period of major military campaigns in West Asia. Powerful military commanders entered into violent conflicts to control the state and struggle for power dominated the closing years of the Republic (See **Unit 1, Section 1.7**).

2.3.4 Social Stratification under the Principate

The victory of Octavian over Mark Antony at Actium ended a century of civil strife and brought peace to Rome by establishing a monarchy hidden behind a republican façade. The society also witnessed significant changes. Firstly, the Senate slowly faded into the background and a new bureaucracy was drawn from the equestrian order. The state became increasingly militarized. Secondly, a sharp line came to be drawn between the 'honestiores' (Senators, Equestrians) and the lower classes, the 'humiliores'. The 'honestiores' enjoyed legal privileges: lighter punishment for crimes, immunity from torture, and a right of appeal to the emperor. As the time passed it became more difficult to move from the lower order to the higher. Thirdly, the monopoly of central political office enjoyed by the Roman aristocracy was broken and there was increasing 'provincialization' within the empire. The provincial gentry had supported Augustus in his rise to power and they achieved major success when finally senators and even emperors began to be chosen from provincial families. By 212 CE, the citizenship had been extended to almost every free inhabitant of the empire. Thus, the Romans brought the upper classes of the provinces into their own government, spread Roman laws and culture and won the loyalty of influential people.

Aristocracy

The Society into which many Provincials entered as Roman citizens was dominated by class and status. The inequalities of wealth, social standing and privilege in the society were immense. The poor normally lived in *nisulae* (an apartment building housing a number of families); which the rich people primarily possessed *domus* (single family homes). The influence of the upper classes in government, society and religious organization remained widespread. Their influence was further increased by the practice of ‘clientela’ by which individuals deemed of inferior status (*clients*) were personally dependent on a more socially distinguished person (*patron*), offering him political support by voting for him or attending him in political gatherings, In return the great man offered benefits such as loans or protection, for example, by using his influence in law courts.

The physical maintenance and political conduct of the cities of the Roman Empire vested in the hands of the aristocracy. By generosity, munificence, these local aristocrats built their cities, sustained their physical activities, patronized their literary culture and provided their entertainments. In return they were acclaimed as ‘benefactors’ or ‘patrons’ of their cities and exercised a lot of influence.

2.4 SLAVERY AND SOCIETY

The Roman society during the Principate and the Late Empire continued to be hierarchical. It was like a pyramid with a small elite group at the top consisting of senators and ‘equites’. The pyramid continued to be based on slavery. Even among the slaves there was hierarchy. *Vilicus*, the slave steward/overseer, who himself was the slave managed the lands, in the absence of the lord. His wife was in-charge of supervision (*vilica*) of the domestic affairs. There were probably about two million slaves at the end of the republic and their numbers remained buoyant in the imperial period. Slave labour was used in various ways and there were mainly three types of slaves in the Roman world:

- i) Domestic slaves lived in the household with the family and performed all tasks related to it. Almost every Roman household kept slaves from a few to thousand. In the first century CE Caelius Isodosus has as many as 4116 slaves. In fact, slaves became rather more of a ‘public show of affluence’. The number of slaves held by individuals was partly a mark of status and even the less well-off like soldiers and war veterans could also be found owning a few slaves. The wealthy houses employed a large number of domestic slaves working as nurses, cooks, gardeners, cleaners, etc. but in most households slaves performed a variety of tasks. Within the domestic slaves there existed hierarchy and specialization. The *procurator* managed the business outside the home; *atriensis* managed the house; *dispensator* managed the supplies and the storage; *silenarius* maintained discipline among slaves.
- ii) Industrial slaves employed in mines, factories, in the galleys and on large farming estates were known as *Latifundia*. They mostly lived and worked in the harshest conditions. Slaves in the *Latifundia* would be overseen by an overseer who was probably also a slave and who could be very harsh on them.
- iii) Public slaves were owned by the state and performed many tasks like working on construction of roads and public buildings or cleaning of temples and baths. The maintenance work of aqueducts (*cura aquarum*) was almost exclusively performed by public slaves – ‘slaves of Caesar’. Slaves were also employed in public baths who served the bathes as masseurs, anointers, delapidators and perfumers. During

the banquets they worked as cooks and served the masters and guests the sumptuous meals. Many of them worked as gladiators. Their role as gladiator was extremely dangerous. In animal hunts often slave gladiators were pitted against animals. They were also part of the militia as rousers with navy and also served military as 'batman'.

In Roman Law, slaves were considered to be the property of their owner. As M.I. Finley (1980) says, the totality of the slave-owner's rights was facilitated by the fact that the slave was an outsider to the society to which he was introduced as a slave. He was denied the most elementary of social bonds – kinship. There were slave families but these were the privileges that could be granted unilaterally by a slave-owner and withdrawn unilaterally. Moreover, a slave-family could be dispersed by sale. The slave was also answerable with his body for all offences.

How the slaves were treated?

The way in which a slave was treated depended almost entirely on his or her circumstances. Slaves working in *Latifundia* or mines usually lived and worked in terrible conditions. There was no distinguishing mark used during Republic to differentiate slaves from free citizens. However, in the late empire period, collars were put in some cases; while they also had restriction not to keep 'long hair' and 'garments made of skin'. They could not technically be 'married', though they could enter into *contribernium* (union with no legal right). But in some kinds of work, especially skilled work, the master might treat his slaves well, and even perhaps help set them up on their own. But ultimately it was the master who decided their fate. Some masters might take particular care of slaves when fell ill, others might follow the advice of typical landowner, Cato, by cutting down the rations of sick slaves, cutting off slaves' tongues or of selling-off those who were elderly or diseased, just like old (decrepit) oxen, old tools, and 'anything else that is superfluous'.

But some slaves of rich masters were allowed to prosper and even acquire slaves of their own. During the Roman Principate and Late Empire Imperial slaves were in the best position to do well for themselves, even before they became freedmen. Finley (1980) has rightly said that in the 1st century CE the greatest opportunity for social mobility lay among the imperial slaves.

Roman literature abounds with examples of cruelty to individual domestic slaves. 'All slaves are enemies', was a Roman proverb. Tens of thousands of slaves were systematically exploited on farms and in mines. They were at the mercy of their masters. They would be overworked, neglected, thrown out, beaten or even killed and they had no real chance of protecting themselves.

The mutual hostility of master and slave, which slavery inevitably evoked, showed through both collectively and individually (Keith Hopkins). Between 135 and 70 BCE there were three major slave rebellions in Sicily and Italy, which were probably incited by the concentration and neglect of thousands of newly enslaved. The first servile war (135-132 BCE) began as revolt of the plantation slaves against the Roman Republic under the leadership of Eunus (of Syrian origin) and Cleon. Planter-slaves brutally murdered the plantation-owner Damophilus. However, in 132 BCE with heavy troops deployment rebellion was quashed. The second servile war began in 104 BCE led by Salvius and later after his death by Athenion. The tumult continued till 102 BCE. Finally, it was supported by the state militia. Among all the three revolts, 73-71 BCE slave rebellion of gladiators led by gladiator general Spartacus was the severest. It had deep impact on Roman history, Pompey and Crassus exploited it for their political gains. It also sowed the seeds for the transition of Roman Republic into an Empire. After 70 BCE

slave rebellion (led by Spartacus) no serious large-scale revolts took place.

Most slave resistance involved neither open rebellion nor murder. It probably took the form of guile, deceit, lying and indolence.

Manumission/Freedmen

There were three classes of freedmen: *ingenuus*, the freeborn who could not be enslaved; the *libertinus*, slaves who gained freedom through **manumission**; and the third were those who purchased their own freedom out of their '*peculium*'. Although Roman society was status conscious and hierarchical, there was at times a surprising degree of social mobility and one of the main routes was through the setting free (manumission) of slaves. Almost all slaves freed by their masters received Roman citizenship. A slave who joined monastery would become free. However, permission of the master to join was a must.

According to Keith Hopkins (1978), historians of ancient slavery have usually described the emancipation of slaves from a humanitarian point of view: they have seen it as a softening element in a harsh system. It is true that for the individual slave, manumission was an act of generosity by the master. But as pointed out by Hopkins, Roman slaves frequently paid substantial sums for their freedom. During their years of service, some slaves were allowed to earn a small sum of money, the '*peculium*' with which they could eventually buy their freedom. Masters also freed slaves as an ostentatious token of their wealth and power.

Roman slaves once freed could blend into lower class society. Some ex-slaves gained considerable wealth and social prominence. In the provinces, ex-slaves of the emperors supervised the collection of taxes and kept an eye for the emperor on the activities of senatorial governors. Private owners used freedmen as business agents, confidential secretaries etc. Many skilled slaves gained their freedom and a few amassed huge fortunes. But the slaves once freed had to overcome the considerable social stigma of their service origins. The upper classes often sneered at freedmen and despised their wealth. Although much of their resentment might have been directed at those very prominent freedmen who acted as secretaries and through their proximity to the emperor were able to gain a lot of power, influence and benefit.

There was a legal regulation that established the relationship of freedmen with their previous masters. The master acted as a kind of patron and the freedman owed obedience and services of different kinds and was legally subject to severe punishment if he defaulted. Furthermore, freedmen could not be admitted to the ranks of senators and equites, and could not marry into the upper classes and could not serve in the legions.

Slavery was so vital to Roman civilization that when the supply of slaves became scarce (by the end of 2nd century CE) a crisis started brewing in the economy. This crisis coincided with political instability and foreign invasions. Eventually the Empire in the West began to decline.

2.5 ROMAN ART AND ARCHITECTURE

The Roman art and architecture looms large that have impacted the art forms across the world.

Architecture

The signature markers of Roman architecture are its temples, basilicas, baths, theatres

and amphitheatres. The monumental architecture of Rome dates back to the 6th century BCE, the period of the establishment of the Republic (509 BCE). In the early phase Roman architecture was greatly influenced by the Etruscan forms — the truscan porch and terracotta decoration. The Capitoline temple of Rome shared close resemblance to Etruscan architecture of Signia and Veii. However, Roman expansion, particularly during BCE 200 to CE 50 brought the Romans in close contacts with the Greeks led to the increasing influence of Greek architectural forms on Roman architecture, which is particularly evident in the 3rd century BCE temple of Gabii and the temple of Apollo at Pompeii (120 BCE), temple of Fortuna Virillis (40 BCE), all reflect the deep impact of the Hellenizing movement. However, late Augustan temples of Concord, Castor and Pollux in the Roman forum do suggest ‘native freedom of arrangement of the limited spaced and highly elaborate mouldings’ (‘Roman Architecture’ 1965: 404). The use of Roman concepts is more evident in the secular architecture — the Roman vaulted spaces in Stabian baths at Pompeii (120 BCE), Tullianum (100 BCE) and Tabularium (78 BCE), though in ornamentation Hellenistic style was used. The Roman influence outside Italy can be seen in the theatres and amphitheatres of Arles and Nimes (16 BCE). From 1st century CE onwards this Greek motifs and ornamentation became more grand and elaborate which is evident in the Colosseum (75-82 CE), which assumed climax under Trajan and Hadrian (c. 98-138 CE) — the Forum of Trajan, villa of Hadrian at Tivoli. Nonetheless provincial buildings did retain ‘great individuality’. In the buildings from CE 200 to the Age of Constantine emphasis seems to be more and more on ‘majesty’ than on ‘material substance’. ‘Even before the end of the 2nd century deep cutting with sharply contrasting light and shadow had begun to detract from the impression of the solid forms in carved ornament’ (‘Roman Architecture’ 1965: 405). The finest example of light and shade can be seen in the arches of Septimius Severus (c. 200 CE). In the palace of Diocletian (c. 300 CE) arched colonnades were extensively used.

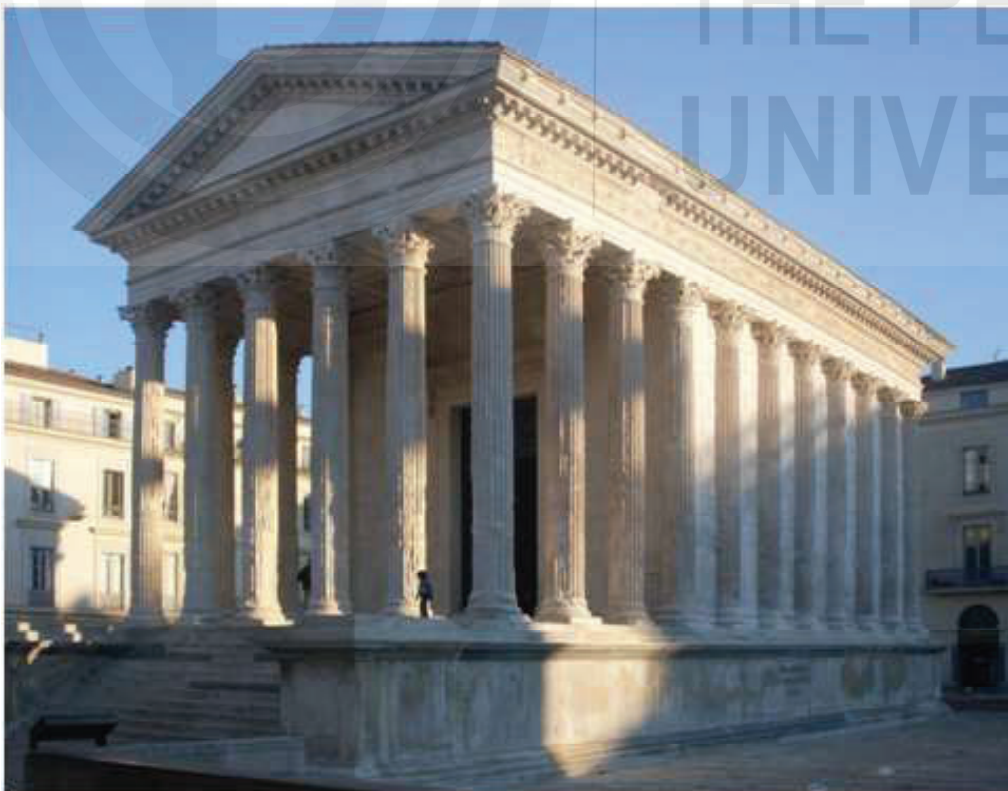


Figure 2.1: Roman Temple at Nimes in France

Credits: Danichou, January, 2011; Waterborough, June, 2019

Source: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/10/MaisonCarr%C3%A9e.jpeg>

Roman Republic

The earliest building material used was *tufa*, a volcanic rock available in abundance which was comparatively soft to work with bronze tools. However, later harder volcanic stones from the Alban Hills were used. In the Late Republic travertine from Tibur (Tivoli) was the chief stone used in the buildings (particularly in the exterior of the Colosseum). Marble was used largely for decoration. In the Flavian palace on the Palatine and Hadrian's villa at Tivoli marble is extensively used. Bronze was vastly used for doors, grilles, and panel cuttings. The pozzuolana (fine chocolate-red volcanic earth), largely available in beds at Pozzuoli (Naples), mixed with lime provided the fine 'natural hydraulic cementing' ('Roman Architecture' 1965: 405). In the early stone buildings square blocks laid in 'headers and stretchers' (*opus quadratum*) were used. Another characteristic feature of Roman architecture was use of stone columns and piers, often monolithic. By the 1st century BCE barrel vaulting was extensively practiced. The finest example of Roman vaulting can be seen in the Basilica of Maxentius (c. 310-320 CE).

Roman basilicas were covered halls served as courts of justice and were also a place for banking and commercial transactions. The prominent of these were Basilica Julia and Basilica Aemiliaon, the southern and northern sides of forum at Rome. **Roman baths** across the world are known as the chief marker of Roman life. They numbered 1000 in Rome alone. Among the best preserved of these baths is the Stabian baths at Pompeii. Another marker of Roman society is their theatres and amphitheatres. Among the prominent theatres that still survive are theatre at Pompeii, Taormina in Sicily, Ostia in Italy and Orange in France. However, the building that stands out is the Roman amphitheatre — the Colosseum, built by emperors Vespasian, Titus and Domitian in 72-80 CE. Among other important amphitheatres are at Capua, Pompeii, Pozzuoli, Arles and Nimes.

Another important feature of the Roman architecture was the **colonnaded avenues**, often adorned with ornamental arches i.e. the Septimius Severus arches at Rome. **Forums**, which were a place where important business were conducted was another marker of Roman life. The forum of Trajan is the most fascinating forums of the Roman empire.

Bridges and aqueducts can rightly be mentioned as the greatest monuments of Rome. Romans used the principle of siphon conduits in their aqueducts. The most celebrated of the Roman aqueducts are Pont du Gard at Nimes and Tarragona and Segovia in Spain.

Roman Art

The Roman art forms derived its strength from two sources — one, produced in and around Rome, and second, produced by Greek artists and under Greek influence and 'mirror the impact of the foreign contacts'. The Roman coins were the artwork of the Greek artists. It is rightly pointed out that, 'It would be safe to guess that if Rome had not met them [artists] in the homelands of Greek art it would never have evolved form in its great art of imperial times... Roman art is the child of the marriage of two traditions — one, the Hellenistic art tradition and the sculptural branch of that tradition in particular, the other, the political, social, religious and psychological tradition of Rome' ('Roman Art' 1965: 413). 'The first appearance of the three art forms that expressed the Roman spirit most eloquently can be traced back to the Hellenistic age. These forms are realistic or veristic portraiture, in which every line, crease and wrinkle, and even blemishes were ruthlessly chronicled; the continuous, or "film", style in narrative art of all types; and the three-dimensional rendering of atmosphere, depth and perspective in relief work and painting' ('Roman Art' 1965: 413).

Though on Roman art Hellenistic influence was almost absolute, nonetheless, in turn Hellenistic art under Roman patronage achieved new heights and ‘gained fresh vigour’ (‘Roman Art’ 1965: 412). The early republican art forms were almost exclusively produced by the Greek artists through Etruscans — the 6th century BCE image of a god is considered to be the work of Vulca of Veii. Metrodorus of Athens was employed by Aemilius Paulus to paint his Macedonian triumph in Rome. However, following Roman campaigns and successes during the 5-3rd century BCE the Etruscan influence as mediators gradually started fading away and the Romans directly came in contact with the Greeks through Campania and Magna Graecia.

The Roman **sculptural art** can be traced in the tradition of second century BCE funerary masks made of wax and terracotta by the Romans and the Etruscans. By *c.* 100 BCE one finds ‘realistic and verilistic heads, busts and statues’ made of bronze, stone and marble by the Romans. The earliest such evidence comes from the period of Sulla (138-78 BCE) which reached its climax by *c.* 75-65 BCE. The classic example of such portraits are that of Augustus and the relief panels of Ara Pacis Augustae (13 BCE). The beginning of the deepening of busts is evident from Late Flavian period which further deepens in the portraits of Trajan. The depth further increases in the age of Hadrian. The bronze equestrian figure of Marcus Aurelius on the Capitol and the marble bust of Commodus Hercules are the finest example of Roman sculptures of the Antonine and Severan periods. Another prominent feature of this period is the vividly carved sarcophagi (stone funeral receptacle usually displayed above ground), an art which was originated in Asia Minor was a direct importation and freely imitated in Rome and Italy. However, by third and fourth century CE definitive tensions appear in the art forms. One finds the simplification of facial planes and the tumbling curls banished and gave way to skullcaps.

From the second half of the first century BCE series of domestic mural paintings appeared. The seminal among them are Odyssey frescoes found in a Vatican house on the Esuiline. It depicts episodes in continuity. Another celebrated lifesize friezes are found on the walls of the Villa of the Mysteries outside the Herculaneum gate of Pompeii and the frescoes in the Golden House of Nero in Rome. The subject matter of these paintings were generally derived from Greek mythology, while some pertains to religious rituals and Roman legends. The Late Republican and early Imperial frescoes are ‘remarkably vivid and extremely naturalistic’ (‘Roman Art’ 1965: 417).

Another important feature of Roman art were its mosaic pavements. Romans employed three techniques of mosaic: *Opus tessellatum*¹: In this mostly geometrical designs were produced. *Opus sectile*²: Through this technique generally abstract and stylized floral patterns were made by using comparatively larger *tesserae*. *Opus vermiculatum*³: In this pictures and floral designs were produced by using small *tesserae*. The Roman mosaics were directly inspired by Late Hellenistic mosaics of the royal palace of the Attalids at Pergamun. Alexander mosaic (Naples) from the House of the Faun at Pompeii of the second century BCE is one of the most celebrated Roman mosaics. The fourth century pavements of the country villa near Piazza Armerina, Sicily are the largest continuous Roman mosaic floor so far unearthed. Like the paintings, the subject matters of these mosaics were also derived largely from Greek mythologies and Roman legends.

¹ Mosaic technique in which uniform *tesserae* (small cubes) were used.

² Mosaic technique in which *tesserae* (small cubes) were comparatively larger than the cubes used in *Opus tessellatum*.

³ Mosaic technique in which *tesserae* (small cubes) were comparatively smaller than the cubes used in *Opus tessellatum*.



Figure 2.2: *Opus Tessellatum* Mosaic, 3rd Century CE
Credits: Jastrow, October, 2006;
Source Photographer: Marie-Lan Nguyen
Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/23/Mosaic_ducks_Massimo.jpg



Figure 2.3: Tigress attacking a calf, marble *opus sectile* (325-350 CE), Basilica of Junius Bassus, Esquiline Hill, Rome
Credits: Jastrow, November, 2006
Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/90/Tiger_calf_Musei_Capitolini_MC1222.jpg



Figure 2.4: *Opus vermiculatum* Floor Mosaic, Cat and Two Ducks, First Quarter of the 1st Century BCE
Credits: Jastrow, December, 2009; Source Photographer: Marie-Lan Nguyen
Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d4/Mosaic_cat_ducks_Massimo_Inv124137.jpg

Check Your Progress-2

1) Write five lines on Roman architecture.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

2) Do you agree that Roman art almost completely reflect the Greek art forms?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

3) Which of the following statements are right or wrong ? Put **T(True)** or **F(False)** against them.

- a) In Rome, the existence of slave-labour in the countryside provided wealth and leisure to the ruling landowning class that lived in cities. (T/F)
- b) Under the Principate, agriculture declined, while trade and industry suffered a blow. (T/F)

- c) The giving up of the policy of conquest or ‘closure of the frontiers’ after Emperor Trajan led to a sharp fall in the supply of slaves in Imperial Rome. (T/F)
- d) After Augustus came to power and introduced a series of reforms, the monopoly of central power enjoyed by the senatorial aristocracy continued as before. (T/F)
- e) The practice of ‘clientela’ further increased the power of the upper classes over Plebeians in the Roman world. (T/F)

2.6 SUMMARY

Roman society was completely dependent on slavery. Their polity, economy and society was practically governed by slaves and slave mode of production. Though, prior to third century BCE this phenomenon was confined to a limited extent among the extremely rich, only those who could afford slaves. The post-third century BCE, with war captives and expansion of the Roman World, slaves became easily available and slavery expanded at a phenomenal pace. However, while exploitation was inherent in the society based on slave mode of production, provision of manumission and the fact that slaves could own ‘property’, helped some slaves to improve their position and they became free citizens. Though, slave society was extremely exploitative in nature, apart from doing menial works, slaves were often educated and employed as tutors; while others were employed in the state departments as clerks, accountants, etc. The discontent among slaves started showing signs from 135 BCE with the rebellion among slave planters in Sicily. Their struggle finally won the freedom and by the establishment of the Empire, slavery/slave mode of production gradually declined.

2.7 KEYWORDS

<i>Coloni</i>	: Tenant-farmers tied to their landlord’s estates and paying a part of the produce in cash or kind to their masters.
Freedmen	: Slave who had been set free and received citizenship.
Legion	: A division of a big number of soldiers including cavalry in the Roman army.
Manumission	: The process of setting the slave free.
<i>Peculium</i>	: When slaves were allowed to earn a small sum of money with which they could ultimately buy their own freedom.
<i>Servus</i>	: A term used for slaves.
Villa	: Fortified estates where powerful landowning classes lived and where peasants came for protection from corrupt officials or barbarian invaders.

2.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) See Section 2.2
- 2) See Sub-sections 2.2.1; 2.2.2
- 3) See Sub-section 2.2.3
- 4) See Sub-section 2.2.2
- 5) See Sub-section 2.2.4

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) See Section 2.5
- 2) See Section 2.5
- 3) a)T, b)F, c)T, d)F, e) T

2.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

Brunt, P.A., (1971) *Social Conflicts in the Roman Republic* (London: Chatto & Windus).

Dudley, D., (1970) *Roman Society* (Hardmondsworth: Penguin Books).

Finley, M.I., (1980) *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York: Viking Press).

Hopkins, Keith, (1978) *Conqueres and Slaves*, Vol. I, *Sociological Studies in Roman History* (New York: Cambridge University Press).

‘Roman Architecture’ (1965) in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 19 (Chicago: William Benton), pp. 403-412.

‘Roman Art’ (1965) in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 19 (Chicago: William Benton), pp. 412-421.

2.10 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

Roman Society and Political Structure: History Videos

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3B5pGiWptb4>

UNIT 3 RELIGION AND THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE ROMAN WORLD*

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Religion and the Roman World: A Civilization of Borrowings
- 3.3 The Christ Cult and Threat to Roman Rule: From Persecution to Promotion
- 3.4 ‘Mystery Religions’ and the Rise of Christianity
- 3.5 Christianity and the Late Roman State
- 3.6 Summary
- 3.7 Keywords
- 3.8 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 3.9 Suggested Readings
- 3.10 Instructional Video Recommendations

3.0 OBJECTIVES

Roman civilization emerged during the first centuries of the first millennium BCE, and as it expanded across the whole Mediterranean region it assimilated diverse cults and sects – what we today commonly call religions – of the societies it encountered. As in other civilizations during the same period, Roman religious practices served social and political purposes, and were connected to the rhythms of daily life. Roman authorities both patronized and repressed cults and religious practices in the process of state formation and consolidation. As Rome’s form of government changed later in the first millennium BCE from republicanism and limited kingship to autocracy (an empire ruled by *caesars*), and as the frontiers of the Roman rule expanded beyond the Italian peninsula, several new religions emerged in Romanized areas and others spread beyond their places of origin. Of the new religions, Christianity came to enjoy a privileged status after 300 CE in the Roman world and it became deeply embedded in the power structures of post-Roman societies (after 500 CE).

After going through this Unit, you should be able to:

- know about religious practices and traditions in the Roman world,
- list the factors responsible for the spread of Christianity.
- understand the developments associated with the rise of Christianity to the political structure of the Roman Empire, and
- appreciate the features of early Christianity and comprehend how they were carried over to post-Roman societies, especially in Europe and the Byzantine empire.

* Prof. Denys P. Leighton, School of Liberal Studies, Ambedkar University, Delhi

3.1 INTRODUCTION

As we have discussed in the previous Units of this Course, ‘Rome’ emerged as a city in Italy around 800 BCE and became the capital of a small polity that for the next five centuries received little attention from its powerful neighbors: the Greek city-states (some of which planted colonists in the Italian peninsula itself), the vast Persian empire, and various tribal kingdoms along the northern, southern and western edges of the Mediterranean Sea. Eight centuries later ‘Rome’ meant not only a great city but an empire of about sixty million people (almost the same as the population of the Chinese Central Kingdom at the time) that extended into west Asia (the ‘Near East’), northern Africa and a large portion of the continent today called Europe.

While we can trace a Roman cultural pattern – some historians and other scholars use the term Romanity – it is more difficult to generalize about the many forms of religion practiced in the Roman world. There were several ‘major’ religions, including pantheism (worship of multiple, ‘all around’ gods and goddesses) in the Greek pattern, Judaism, Manichaeism, ‘mystery religions’ (including Mithraism: see **Section 3.4**), and possibly hundreds of minor cults and worship patterns. And there was of course Christianity, which emerged during the first century CE as a sect in Roman Judea – partly building on the centuries-old Jewish faith tradition and partly rebelling against it – to become the state religion of the whole Roman empire by the late fourth century CE. The Roman Christian leaders who adopted the title Pope (from the **Latin** word *papa*: father), including Pope Leo I in the fifth century CE, aspired to lead a world-wide community of Christian worshippers, even though there were by that time several types or branches of Christianity in Asia and Africa whose leaders did not always acknowledge the supremacy of the Pope in the city of Rome. A reasonable estimate of the world’s Christians around the year 400 CE puts *as many as half of them beyond the borders of the Roman empire*, as far away as Persia (the Persian Sasanian empire¹ challenged Roman rule over what are now Syria, Jordan and Turkey), Arabia, Armenia, Georgia, central Asia, north Africa, Ethiopia and perhaps India. Nevertheless, it is significant that the popes in the city of Rome since the time of Leo I have taken the title Supreme Pontiff (in Latin, *pontifex maximus*: chief priest of the state religion), which was a title and office held by Roman rulers for centuries before the emergence of Christianity.

Judaism: monotheistic religion of the Jews dating back to at least 1500 BCE. In its original form, Judaism holds that God (Yahweh) revealed his laws and commandments to Moses, a leader of the enslaved Israelites, in written and oral forms that comprise the *Torah*, the main part of the Hebrew Bible (or ‘Old Testament’ to the Christians). Strong commandments and prohibitions were characteristic of Judaism; this rigour of practice went into Christianity and subsequently into Islam.

Manichaeism: religious movement originating in Persia named after Mani (216-274 CE), whose philosophy emphasized the eternal struggle between good and evil. Mani originally belonged to a Jewish-Christian sect called the Elcesaites. After experiencing visions as a teenager, Mani left his parental sect and travelled to Afghanistan, where he encountered Hindu and Buddhist teachings. Because Mani’s preaching was seen as a threat to the majority Zoroastrian religion of Persia, he was imprisoned and died. Some aspects of the life of Mani were told by the scholar al-Biruni. Manichaeism influenced Christians not only in the areas under Sassanid (Persian) rule but in (still) Roman Asia Minor, Egypt and north Africa.

¹ Sasanian (or Sasanid) empire: ruled by the house (dynasty) of Sasan, 224-651 CE, with its capital in Istakhr (Persepolis), in present-day southern Iran. The Sasanian empire encompassed a large part of the world traditionally controlled by the Persians and was the last Persian empire before the rise of Islam. For further details, see **Unit 13, BHIC-102**.

To the people of the Italian peninsula recognized as ancestors of the Romans, the Etruscans and Latins, worship of various deities (gods and goddesses) was integral to the life of elite as well as common people. Rome emerged as a coalition of tribal societies in central Italy and incorporated many of their social and cultural (including religious) practices. Long before the formation of Roman Christianity and for three centuries after the birth and supposed resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, ‘native’ or indigenous Roman deities were worshipped. People in and around Rome (the capital, the ‘Eternal City’ celebrated by Roman poets Tibullus, Ovid and Livy) practiced ancestor worship and also worshipped deities of their tribes and of the state. Family ancestors were memorialized in household rituals and ceremonies. This was Roman *domestic* religion, similar in nature to what is practiced in China and other societies around the world. Other forms of early Roman worship involved veneration of gods and goddesses of sun and moon, fertility and victory, as was practiced in other societies of ancient Europe, the Near East and Africa. The early Roman state sponsored temples and sacred sites and enforced worship of deities favoured by leading Roman officials. Temples honouring ‘native’ Roman deities, such as Janus (god of beginnings and endings) and Vesta (goddess of the hearth or home-fire), were located in Rome’s Forum and on the Capitoline Hill, near the most important buildings and spaces of political life and civil authority.

A deity who came to be worshipped as central (if not the supreme god for all Romans) was Jupiter. This ‘king of the gods’ was adopted by Romans from the older civilization of the Hellenes (‘Greeks’), who worshipped Zeus: thus, Jupiter of the Romans was a renamed Greek deity. Romans by c. 400 BCE had adopted or imported several deities from the Greek *pantheon* (collection of deities), just as educated Romans were expected to learn the Greek language through which to study Greek poetry, drama and philosophy. Hera, wife of Zeus, was brought into Roman religion as Juno, and the children of Zeus and Hera – Hermes, Ares, Athena and Aphrodite – were integrated into the Roman religious pattern as Mercury, Mars, Minerva and Venus. Likewise, Chronos, the Greek ‘Father of Time’ and proto-god who was parent of both Zeus and Hera, entered the Roman pantheon as Saturn. Hades, son of Chronos and brother of Zeus and Poseidon (Roman Neptune), entered Roman religion as Pluto. Official Roman practice until the fourth century CE permitted worship of the (originally) ‘Greek’ deities alongside the ‘native’ Roman deities of family and state. Temples of Jupiter and Saturn were especially important, being funded by the state and located near the Forum in Rome. Romans also championed several fertility cults and ‘mysteries’ that had originated in different places around the Mediterranean Sea and Asia (see **Section 3.4**).

In sum, while different forms of religions were practiced across the Roman world, they did not have a social meaning separate from politics and issues of public order. A radical innovation of the Roman state during the fifth century CE was the effective prohibition of all worship practices other than those promoted by the leaders of the Christian Church (Roman Catholicism). The late Roman state made a distinction in law between Christians, who were proper subjects enjoying protection of Roman law, and **pagans** and heretics, whose freedoms were limited.

3.2 RELIGION AND THE ROMAN WORLD: A CIVILIZATION OF BORROWINGS

We may begin to understand the rise of Christianity in the Roman world by more closely examining, first, aspects of Roman culture and its inheritances or borrowings from other cultures, and second, the means by which ‘Rome’ impressed its stamp on the tens of millions of people it came to rule beyond the Roman heartland. The Greek or Hellenic impact on Roman society from about 400 BCE has already been mentioned.



Figure 3.1: Head of Janus, Vatican Museum, Rome

Credit: Loudon Dodd

Source:<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Janus1.JPG>



Figure 3.2: Vesta, the virgin goddess of the hearth, home and family in Roman mythology

Credit: Guillaume Rouille

(*Promptuarii Iconum Insigniorum*)

Source:<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vesta-Roma.jpg>

As might be expected, when Roman rule spread to Gaul and Spain, north of the Alps, along the valleys of the Danube river, to the Near East and to northern Africa, principal cities in the Roman provinces became filled with temples of the official (or state-supported) Roman cults. The Roman cults existed alongside temples of 'local' deities, which the Romans patronized as a way of gaining acceptance of the local population. For example, the ancient Semitic deity Baal was recognized by the Romans as Jupiter Heliopolitanus, and the Romans erected or re-modelled Baal temples (for instance, in Baalbek, Lebanon). Whether in the city of Rome or in other centres of Roman power, management of important temples was sought after by Roman gentlemen, both the patricians who sat in the Roman Senate and the plebeians (non-nobles) who aspired to political office.

At some points in Roman history, supreme leaders, who were already chief priests of the state cults, were proclaimed gods, usually after their deaths. For example, Gaius Julius Caesar (100–44 BCE), had a statue of himself placed in the temple of Quirinus, one of the ancient Roman deities of war. Julius Caesar's self-deification was unusual and objectionable, though including rulers in the imperial cult after their deaths was common. In several ancient societies, such as the Assyrians, Persians and Egyptians, supreme rulers were seen as gods or demi-gods. Romans too were used to recognizing legendary heroes as gods and new cults were established all the time, and some of them were quickly forgotten.

The phenomenon of veneration of the dead, whether family members, state rulers or legendary founders, which has been common in many societies throughout history, throws into question basic definitions of religion, the sacred and worship, about which there are various scholarly opinions. Is veneration of human beings part of religion or different from it? Can mortals become 'divine'? Can 'the sacred' only remain so if it is clearly separated from the 'profane', the everyday? The Latin term *religio* is derived from the verb 'to bind' or 'to tie', suggesting that religion in Roman society was understood as an obligation or duty. A cult (*cultus*) had to have care-givers or followers: 'cult' and 'cultivation' are words from the same root. Some Roman religious practices happened in an institutional framework and others did not. Not all Roman religions had, or evidently required, officials (priests or priestesses) or a formal theology. Cultic practices could be either voluntary or legislated. Thus, entering the sanctum of a temple of Jupiter, following a street procession of idols or honoured objects, observing one day of each

week as a day without labour (such as the Jewish Shabbat or **Sabbath**²), placing food or drink before the statue of an ancestor, gathering in a group to hear a religious teacher read from a sacred book, participating in a ceremony to get initiated into a group of fellow believers – all of these were expressions of religious behavior in the Roman world.



Figure 3.3: Julius Caesar, Gardens of the Tuilleries

Credit:Jastrow/Ssolbergj

Source:https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Julius_Caesar_Coustou_Louvre.png



Figure 3.4: Statue of Constantine I, Capitoline Museum, Rome

Credit: Jean-Christophe BENOIST

Source:<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rome-Capitole-StatueConstantin.jpg>

Scholars have pointed out that in studying the ancient Roman world, as other times and places, there is a danger of identifying too many human practices as religious. What about, for example, magic and astrology, which the original Romans and the people they assimilated practiced? Many Romans would not have considered these arcane practices as separate from religion. We might take as either encouragement or caution the observation of the sociologist of religion, Emile Durkheim (1858 - 1917), that religion is basically each society's worship of itself. Nevertheless, key issues in understanding Roman religion concern worship practices and rituals, how these habits were permitted, encouraged or enforced by ritual specialists or teachers, and how officers of the state responded to the different communities of worshippers (of various cults). As we shall see, Roman officials in the first four centuries CE saw the spreading cult of Jesus Christ, 'Christianity', as especially problematic. As historian Marvin Perry observes:

To many Romans, Christians were enemies of the social order: strange people who would not accept the state gods, would not engage in Roman festivals, scorned gladiator contests, stayed away from public baths, glorified non-violence, refused to honour deceased emperors as gods, and worshipped a crucified 'criminal' as Lord. Romans ultimately found in Christians a universal scapegoat for the ills burdening the Empire, such as famines, plagues, and military reverses.

Perry, 2012: 111

Note that Roman civic (political) and religious officialdom had usually cooperated, so the spectacle of Christians disobeying officials and the law, trying to define a sphere of

² In the Jewish tradition a compulsory day of rest and worship (mentioned in the Book of Exodus 31: 13-17), as commanded by God to Moses. The Christians adopted this Jewish practice, most Christian sects shifting the day of sabbath observance from Saturday to Sunday.

activity above or beyond the civil law, marked Christians as revolutionary in the literal meaning of the word. The potential and actual conflict between religious duties and civil power and law is a theme that runs across 'European' history both before the official collapse of the Roman polity in 476 CE as well as afterwards, though the basic issues are by no means unique to Europe.

The foregoing sections have suggested that religions grew up in the Roman world as traditions of the 'core' Roman society absorbed alien influences and the Roman state adapted to challenges. While more inhabitants of the Roman empire were subjects than citizens, Roman citizenship could be confirmed or acquired by military service. By serving in Roman armies, countless Africans, Syrians, Greeks, Slavs, Spaniards, Gauls, Germans and Britons gained legal and political benefits of Roman-ness. Assimilation of barbarians, whether through conquest or alliance, was preferable to the Roman empire facing constant resistance from those at its borders. It is clear that the Roman empire's success was also due in some part to *cultural accommodation* – ways in which Rome adopted beliefs and practices of populations it subjugated. This was a complex process of negotiation and was not necessarily the result of a preconceived strategy. By adopting 'foreign' religious practices and deities, Roman occupiers could blend in with the populations they ruled and accrue prestige and respect as protectors of the local cults. Local populations were in turn Romanized by acknowledging the religious practices and patronizing the cults of the Romans, just as they accepted other aspects of Roman civilization including Roman laws.

The Hellenization of the Roman world has already been mentioned. In addition to adopting Greek deities, the Romans were awed by Greek *philosophia*, which involved contemplation of physical matter as well as of what was (invisibly) beyond or behind matter, metaphysics, and of ontology (questions of being). Greek philosophers in the six or seven centuries before Christ had speculated about the relationship between body and soul and about the continuation of the soul beyond the death of the body (immortality). The *Confessions* (autobiography) of Augustine (354–430 CE) and his work *The City of God* help us understand how educated Romans who converted to Christianity dealt with earlier traditions of knowledge and contemplation. Augustine was an African Roman subject who became Christian bishop of Hippo and was proclaimed a saint. Augustine and other 'Church Fathers'³ tried to use Greek philosophy to justify (explain) their Christian faith. Among Augustine's conclusions was that Jewish and Greek learning could be of use to Christians: wisdom of the pagans should not be entirely rejected. Neoplatonism (referring to Greek philosopher Plato, 428/427–348/347 BCE) from the third through sixth centuries CE was a trend of thought developing in Alexandria, Athens and some other intellectual centres around the Roman world that had Christian communities. Neoplatonists promoted the idea of an unknowable source, 'the One', at the beginning and end of all reality and beyond observable reality. Several Christian sympathizers with the Neoplatonists equated 'the One' with God. In the sixth and seventh centuries CE, the Christian intellectuals Procopius (a historian), Boethius and John Philoponus were using ideas of Aristotle and other ancient Greek philosophers in disputes with **bishops** and other church authorities, and these uses of pagan knowledge were not prohibited or punished.⁴ Later in the Middle Ages, when the theologian Thomas Aquinas (1224 or 1225–1274 CE) pronounced philosophy to be the handmaiden of religion, he was acknowledging a Christian debt to the pagan Greeks.

³ Or apostolic fathers (in succession to Christ's first disciples): Christian teachers, theologians and church administrators of the period c. 100–700 CE who are seen as the founders of institutional Christianity. Their importance is indicated by the fact that many Church Fathers have been declared saints by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches.

⁴ Bishop from Greek *episkopos*, meaning 'guardian': see Keywords at end of the Unit.

3.3 THE CHRIST CULT AND THREAT TO ROMAN RULE: FROM PERSECUTION TO PROMOTION

According to Christian authorities of all Christian churches or sects, Jesus of Nazareth was raised by Jewish parents (Joseph and Mary) of humble social status, he received divine revelation, he took to preaching across Judea, he was opposed by some other Jews as a false prophet, and he was executed by Roman authorities in Jerusalem as a threat to public order. Whether or not we believe the Christ story, we can gain insight into the rise of Christianity through the Christian Bible – the New Testament, composed first in Greek, but also subsequently in Latin, Syriac, Armenian and other languages – as well as from works by and about the ‘Church Fathers’, men like Tertullian, Cyprian, Origen, Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, Basil, Athanasius, Anthony, John Chrysostom, Aphrahat and Isaac of Antioch. Texts have survived by and about exemplary female Christian leaders of that time. Other useful sources are the stories of the lives of the early saints, holy men and women commended for their actions or their defiance.

The Christian saints were martyrs (*martyrs* = Greek for ‘witness’) for their faith. Stories about them provided lessons about behaviour and shaped the self-definition of the Christian faith: literally, the saints’ tales shaped the Christian self. As might be expected, these sources favour the Christians and criticize the pagans or heretics; they depict the martyrs’ righteousness and suffering as part of God’s plan for the salvation of humanity. (The Latin word *pagan* by the fifth century CE meant any non-Christian.) Secular or non-Christian sources from this time reveal other reasons of conflict and suffering: Christian rejected Roman customs and social norms – such the imperial cult celebrating emperors – and defied the law.

The Biblical account of the life, death and reported resurrection of Jesus the Christ (of Nazareth) as well as non-Christian accounts like that of the Roman historian Titus Flavius Josephus (37-100 CE)⁵ reveal one obvious reason for the Roman state’s suspicion of the Christ cult: some Jews who resented Roman occupation of the ancient Jewish kingdom (Judea or Israel) greeted Jesus as their Messiah, ‘the anointed one’ who would rule the Jews and perhaps other peoples in an age of universal peace. The New Testament itself does not make very clear what Jesus actually wanted for his Jewish homeland in terms of political rule. The legend of Jesus as an executed Messiah, a martyr for Jewish freedom, presented a challenge to Roman control over Judea and the neighbouring region. Roman authorities executed Christ in degrading fashion along with common thieves and he was mocked as the false or pretending ‘King of the Jews’. There is little direct evidence of Christ’s apostles – the messengers bearing his teachings and the founders of the church – playing a major role in the Jewish political and military unrest of the second half of the first century CE. Roman Jews were among the first Christ followers, but many Jews saw Christ as a false Messiah. It is evident, though, that the Jesus story appealed to non-Jews throughout the empire. The main books of the Christian Bible included the reports by the apostles of a being who had a human mother, who was both man and son of God, who was a religious teacher, who was seen to die, and who was seen to revive (be ‘resurrected’) and ascend to the realm of his heavenly father. Both Judaism and emerging Christianity took a harsh view of idol worship and of any and all forms of polytheism. In spite of many differences between emerging Christianity and established Judaism, both recognized only one omnipotent God – the God of Moses and Abraham as well as Christ – and almost all sects of Christians over

⁵ The key works of Josephus in this connection are *The Jewish War* and *Antiquities of the Jews*, included in *Works of Josephus*, Complete and Unabridged New Updated Edition, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, Massachusetts: M. A. Hendrickson Publishers, 1987).

the ages have accepted the Jewish ‘Old Testament’ as a foundation of their own faith. The sometimes tense and violent relations between Christians and Jews over the centuries have been tempered by recognition of a common stock of ideas and beliefs.

The growth of Christian communities during the third and fourth centuries CE prompted Roman authorities to pay more attention to them, to monitor more closely their relations with other communities and the Christians’ attitude towards government. The emperor Constantine I, who ruled from the eastern part of the empire, removed in 313 CE the legal prohibitions against and persecutions of Christians that had been put into place by earlier rulers. Constantine converted to Christianity only at the end of his life and he did *not* make Christianity the official state religion of the empire. Instead, he allowed Christianity to co-exist in Roman territories with other religious faiths and cults. Constantine also attempted to make Christianity more orderly by sponsoring church councils, such as the one held at **Nicaea** (in Asia Minor) in 325 CE to resolve disputes about Christian doctrine (theology) and church governance that had emerged among communities of Christians. Since Constantine did this without yet proclaiming himself a Christian, we may surmise that his main motivation was his imperial duty to maintain public order. Emperor Theodosius I in 380 CE made Christianity the state religion of the Roman empire, and by the middle of the fifth century non-Christians were prohibited from joining the Roman imperial administration. Many historians have cited evidence of growing intolerance of Roman and Eastern Christians in the late 300s and early 400’s CE towards people following other faiths and cults – including the many Roman subjects who worshipped Christ as the son of God *as well as other deities*. Before *c.* 350 CE there were evidently many part-time Christians. It is important to note that few Romans before that time, whether rulers or common people, regarded a person’s participation in more than one cult as a moral or political problem, so long as people respected civil authorities and the law.

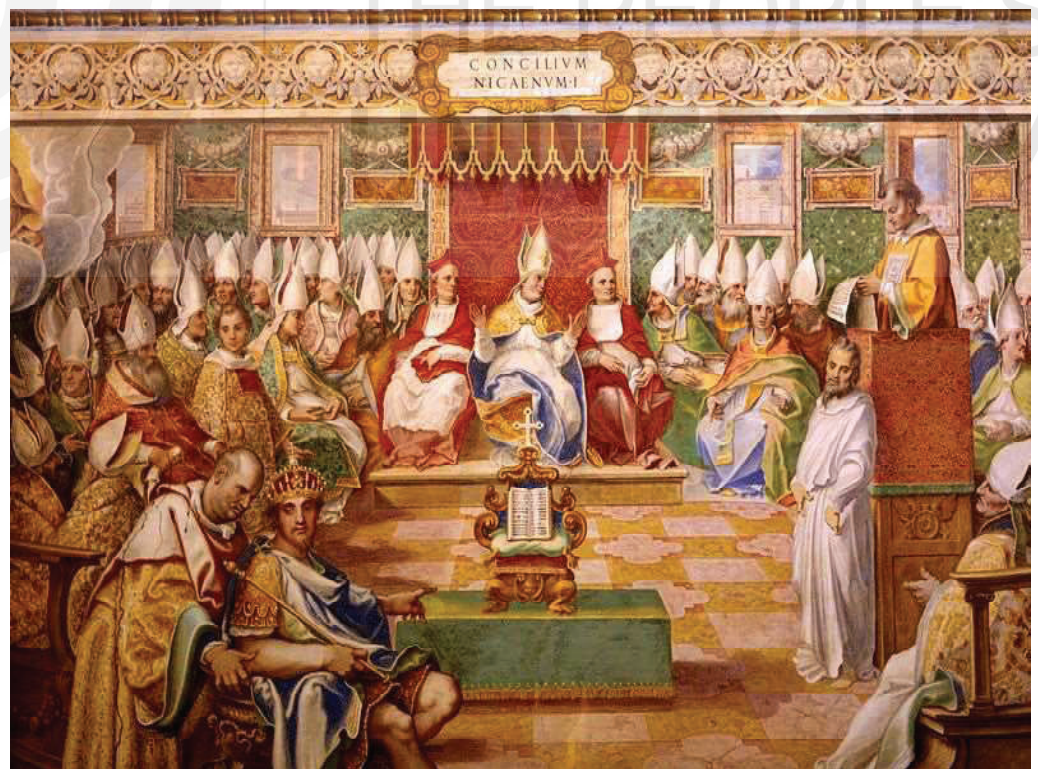


Figure 3.5: Council of Nicaea 325 CE

Credit: Fresco in Capella Sistina, Vatican

Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nicea.jpg>

Check Your Progress-1

1) Name some religious sects or cults in the Roman world before the dominance of Christianity and briefly describe the philosophies or ideas behind them.

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2) Why was the Roman world referred to as ‘a civilization of borrowings’? Explain.

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3) Describe some examples of Hellenization and the influence of Greek *philosophia* on the Roman world.

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4) Why would some people in the Roman world have understood early Christianity as a sect of Judaism?

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3.4 ‘MYSTERY RELIGIONS’ AND THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY

In trying to explain the emergence of Roman Christianity and the specific forms it took, some scholars have emphasized the special relationship between the Christian cult and mystery religions, such as the Eleusinian mysteries and Mithraism. The Greek word *mystes* meant one who had been taught secrets – more specifically, one initiated or ritually introduced into membership of a cult. As mentioned before, there were several

old cults – such as the worship of Cybele, the Great Mother, that entered the Roman empire from the east – that involved mass or popular participation in rituals and observances to ensure fertility and plentitude (good harvests). Some ancient fertility cults involved animal sacrifices or rituals to welcome the flooding of a great river or the ‘return’ of the sun after winter solstice. The Eleusinian mysteries practiced at sacred sites in Greece, and probably pre-dating ‘Greek civilization’, celebrated the descent of Persephone into Hades (the under-world) and her return to the land of the living for about eight months of the year (spring and summer seasons). The cult was not open to everyone, only to *initiates* who participated in elaborate membership ceremonies. Similarly, Mithraism, which appears to have originated in west Asia and had Indic elements (Vedas mention Mitra, a goddess of light), was a cult linked to sun worship and involved sacrifice of bulls. Initiates gathered in underground chambers or buildings with cave-shaped rooms (*mithraea*) and benches installed for a common meal by the worshippers. Mithraism included ceremonies of ritual purification and promised re-birth or afterlife. In the Roman world the cult was especially favoured by soldiers. Hundreds of ruins of *mithraea* of Roman times have been found from Syria, Palestine and Armenia to Hungary, Germany and England.

Eleusinian mysteries are related with the cult of Demeter and Persephone based at Eleusis in Greece. This cult celebrated the abduction of Persephone from her mother Demeter and their reunion. Mithraism was named after a god of the Persians and Armenians, Mithras, with possible shared Indic roots (Mitra is praised in the *Rig Veda*). The art/iconography of Mithraism shows the god in three scenarios: springing forth as a baby from a rock; in heroic pose as an adult killing a bull while looking at the sun; shooting an arrow into stone causing water to spring. Because no Mithraic scripture or holy book survives, the theology of Mithraism remains speculative: some promise of immortality or transformation was evidently central to the cult. There were seven ‘degrees’ or ranks of members of the cult, with different secrets revealed with each degree.



Figure 3.6: Mithras Relief

Credit: Faustyna E.

Source:<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mithras-Relief.jpg>

The Christian basilicas (cathedrals) of San Clemente and San Prisca in the city of Rome have *mithraea* beneath them. This suggests a close relationship between Mithraism and Christianity during the three or four centuries of their co-existence. Either some Mithraists also practiced Christianity or Christians saw Mithraism as a parody or imitation of their ‘true’ faith, or both of these. Early Christian texts and reports are filled with complaints about the Mithraists. From one perspective, though, early Christianity appears not very different from Mithraism. Christians had initiations (**baptism** of children or adults to indicate joining the church), purification rituals and sacraments (blessing by a priest with holy water, ‘last rites’ of the dead to help them pass into heaven) allowed only to ‘members’ of the church or congregation, telling of sacred stories in congregation (church preaching) and group celebration of a meal. Christians celebrated the *eucharist*, ‘holy communion’, reminding them of the Last Supper eaten by Christ together with his apostles.

Mithraism and Christianity developed together in the Roman empire and, through rivalry, helped from each other. Mystery religions appear to have taught early Christians about rituals and ceremonies of belonging. Although Mithraism has no surviving holy book or scripture, it is plausible that Christians picked up ideas about transformation and about participation of humans in the divine mystery from Mithra-ist theology. The final phase of their competition saw the Christians abolishing Mithraism and other mystery religions during the fifth century CE as **heresy** (sinful and punishable error).

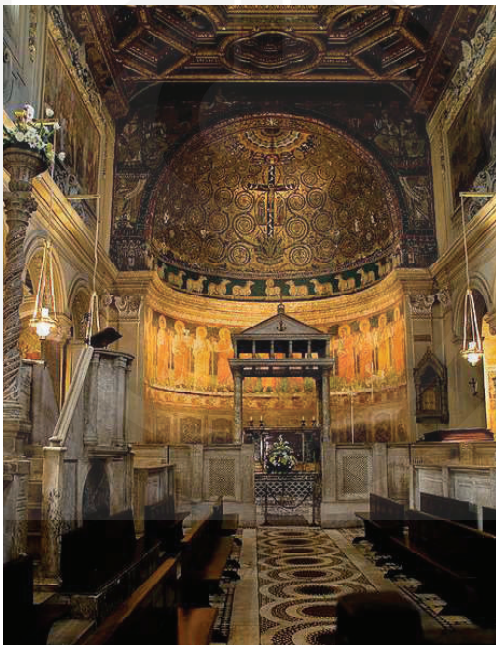


Figure 3.7: Basilica di S. Clemente

Credit:mppp(<https://www.panoramio.com/photo/3363563>)

Source:https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Basilica_di_S.Clemente_-_panoramio.jpg



Figure 3.8: Façade of Santa Prisca

Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Source:https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Santa_Prisca,_Rome#/media/File:Santa_Prisca-facciata-antmoose.jpg

3.5 CHRISTIANITY AND THE LATE ROMAN STATE

The collapse of the Roman empire was a prolonged process: to say that it ended in 476 CE with a barbarian occupation of the city of Rome (one of many over the centuries) is a simplification (For further details on Decline of the Roman Empire, see next Unit [Unit 4]). Under Constantine I there was a formal separation of ‘Eastern Rome’ (centered on Byzantium) from western Rome, and emperors calling themselves Roman and Christian continued to rule from Constantinople (city of Constantine, now Istanbul)

Roman Republic

until 1453 CE. Constantinople became centre of another emerging type of Christianity, Eastern (Greek) Orthodox Christianity, headed by a Patriarch. The Eastern Orthodox church was Greek, not Latin, in language and liturgy, and Eastern Orthodoxy vied with Roman Catholicism for authority over the Christians of Asia, Europe and Africa. As we have seen, the power of the Christian Church strengthened throughout the empire from the third century CE and Christian sects gathered adherents on the margins of the Roman world. Indeed, Odoacer, the king of the Goths who occupied Rome in 476 as a client or sub-ruler of the emperor in Constantinople, was already a Christian, although of the Arian sect that was not approved by the Pope.

Pope Leo I equated the Christian realm (*orbis Christianus*) with Rome’s empire (*imperium*), and educated Romans of the fifth century CE saw the Roman empire as the divinely ordained successor of ‘universal’ empires that included the empire of Alexander the Great, the Persian empire and the still older kingdoms of the Assyrians and Babylonians. Leo’s equation of a Christian realm with a Roman *imperium* tells us about the ambitions of the **papacy** (the ‘office’ and institution of the Roman Pope) as ‘protector of the faithful’ and about the continuing political and cultural appeal of the Roman pattern of civilization. During Europe’s ‘Middle Ages’ (c. 500-1500 CE) kings who aspired to rule larger territories in Europe, such as Charlemagne (King of the Franks from 768 CE, crowned in 800 CE Emperor of the Romans in Rome by Pope Leo III) and the German king Otto I (reigned 962 -972 CE as Holy Roman Emperor), cultivated the support of the Roman Catholic Church while also trying to limit its authority. By the eleventh century CE, *Christianitas* (Christendom) was a term used consistently by leaders of Europe to refer to all the lands of western and eastern Europe with Christian worshippers and Christian rulers.

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) Describe some similarities and differences between ‘mystery religions’ (including Mithraism) and early Christianity.

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- 2) Describe the changing relationship between Christianity and the Roman state between the first and fifth centuries CE.

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- 3) Why was the Christ cult considered a threat by the Roman rulers? Explain.

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3.6 SUMMARY

Just as Rome adopted political practices from the Greek city-states and subsequent monarchies, Christianity in the Roman world drew upon and modified Jewish, Greek and Eastern thought. The political triumph of Christianity in the Roman empire had consequences for the societies of Europe, Asia and Africa that saw themselves as successors to the Roman empire (after 500 CE). This Unit has not described several important features of early Christianity, such as the development of its symbolism, the role of monasticism (people ‘withdrawing from the world’ to contemplate the divine) and clerical celibacy (its male priests were discouraged from marrying), the denial of women’s participation in the priesthood, Christian art and architecture, or early Christian ideas and beliefs about education. But it has been shown how the Christians of the Roman empire (and of post-Roman Europe and the Near East) followed several different doctrines, whose custodians tried to impeach each other as heretics. Civil leaders were drawn into these controversies and sometimes tried to mend divisions among groups of Christians; at other times they exploited doctrinal conflicts to win groups of Christians to their side.

Despite the foundational stories of Jesus Christ and his apostles living simply and with indifference to the things ‘of the world’, the church leaders’ own praise of holy poverty and their condemnation of the world of politics that ensnared people in sin, the churches became wealthy institutions and churchmen wielded political power. From the fourth century CE onwards, bishops and other high church officials were predominantly wealthy Roman citizens, and some served their church along with holding other government offices, just as ambitious Romans had done in pre-Christian times. The church administrative district of Rome in the late sixth century CE was the largest landowner in all of Italy. The papacy, bishops and monasteries by that time owned estates across Gaul (France), Hispania (Spain and Portugal) and north Africa, and their counterparts in Eastern Rome were similarly favoured. The emergence of another major monotheism, Islam, in the seventh century CE, further consolidated the political, social and economic position of Christianity in the region that would eventually be called ‘Europe’.

3.7 KEYWORDS

- Baptism** : Ritual immersion and initiation ceremony in most forms of Christianity, whether the baptized person is child or adult.
- Bishop** : A member of the Christian priesthood who is ordained or appointed by a still higher member of the priesthood, such as a metropolitan, a patriarch or the Pope.
- Eucharist** : From Greek *eucharistia*, ‘thanksgiving’. A sacrament (holy ceremony) of the Catholic and most other Christian churches. Through the sacrament of the *eucharist* worshippers achieve

- Heresy** : From Greek *eresia*, ‘thing chosen’, implying a religion falsely or ignorantly chosen. Heresy therefore meant willfully following false teachings and heretics were punished under the law.
- Latin** : Language originating in the Italian peninsula and the official, main language of administration of the Roman empire and later of the Roman Catholic church. Refers also to an Italian tribe pre-dating the Romans and their domain in central Italy.
- Nicaea** : Assembly or council meeting in 325 CE in Asia Minor, sponsored by Emperor Constantine I to resolve disputes about Christian doctrine (theology) and church governance that had emerged among communities of Christians.
- Pagan** : A non-Christian other than a Jew. From Latin *pagus*, an administrative district beyond towns. A *paganus* was therefore likely to be a simple or ignorant country person who was untouched by the new religiosity happening in the towns and cities.
- Pantheon** : From Greek ‘all divinities’ or ‘all gods’; collection of gods. The pantheon of the Greeks (Hellenes) included gods and goddesses who were imagined to be related to one another, much like humans.
- Papacy** : Referring to the spiritual and administrative office or domain of the Pope (Latin *papa* = ‘father’), the bishop of Rome, apostolic successor to St. Peter, leader of the worldwide Catholic faith/religion.

3.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) See Section 3.1 for details
- 2) See Section 3.2
- 3) See Section 3.2
- 4) See Section 3.3

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) See Section 3.4
- 2) See Section 3.5

3) See Section 3.5

3.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

Brown, Peter, (1978) *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

Brown, Peter, (1993) 'The Problem of Christianization,' *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 82: 89-106.

Inglebert, Hervé, (2012) 'Introduction,' in Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) (online edition: DOI 10.1093/oxfordhb/98780195336931.013.0000).

Lössl, Josef and Nicholas J. Baker-Brian (eds.), (2018) *A Blackwell Companion to Religion in Late Antiquity* (Malden, MA: Wiley and Sons).

Perry, Marvin, (2012) *Western Civilizations: A Brief History*, Tenth Edition (United States: Wadsworth Cengage Learning).

Sarris, Peter, (2011) *Empires of Faith: The Fall of Rome to the Rise of Islam, 500-700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Sarris, Peter, del Santo, Matthew and Booth, Phil (eds.), (2011) *An Age of Saints?: Power, Conflict and Dissent in Early Medieval Christianity* (Leiden and Boston: Brill).

Taylor, David G. K., (2000) 'Christian Regional Diversity,' in P. Eisdler (ed.), *The Early Christian World*, vol. I (London and New York: Routledge: 330-43).

3.10 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

Rome and Christianity, National Geographic

<https://video.nationalgeographic.com/tv/00000144-2f3a-df5d-abd4-ff7f265c0000>

Jesus: Rise to Power 3/3 Christians, National Geographic

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F0iDQ65Ubas>

UNIT 4 CRISIS OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE*

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Background and History
- 4.3 The Late Roman Empire
- 4.4 Political Anarchy
 - 4.4.1 Military Government
 - 4.4.2 Crisis of Governance
 - 4.4.3 Civil Wars
 - 4.4.4 Political Fragmentation
 - 4.4.5 Breakdown of the Political Machinery
 - 4.4.6 The Rise of the Eastern Empire
- 4.5 Military Decline
 - 4.5.1 Over-expansion and Military Overspending
 - 4.5.2 Weakening of Roman *Legions*
 - 4.5.3 Influx of Mercenary Soldiers
 - 4.5.4 Army no Longer a Reliable Instrument of Coercion
- 4.6 Economic Crisis
 - 4.6.1 Falling Economy, High Inflation and Absentee Landlordism
 - 4.6.2 Crisis of Subsistence
 - 4.6.3 Decline in Artisanal Production and Long-distance Trade
 - 4.6.4 Increased Monetary Pressure, Fiscal Crisis and Return to a Natural Economy
- 4.7 Social Upheavals
 - 4.7.1 Population Decline
 - 4.7.2 Decline in Public Spirit
 - 4.7.3 Brigandage
 - 4.7.4 Shift of Aristocracy to Countryside
- 4.8 Crisis of the Slave Mode of Production
- 4.9 Incursions of the Germanic Tribes
- 4.10 Historiography: Crisis, Decline and Transformation of the Roman Empire
- 4.11 Summary
- 4.12 Keywords
- 4.13 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 4.14 Suggested Readings
- 4.15 Instructional Video Recommendations

4.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you shall be able to:

- understand the process of decline of the Roman Empire,
- list the main factors that led to this decline,
- analyze the systematic breakdown of the Empire, and
- know about the writings of scholars on the decline of the empire.

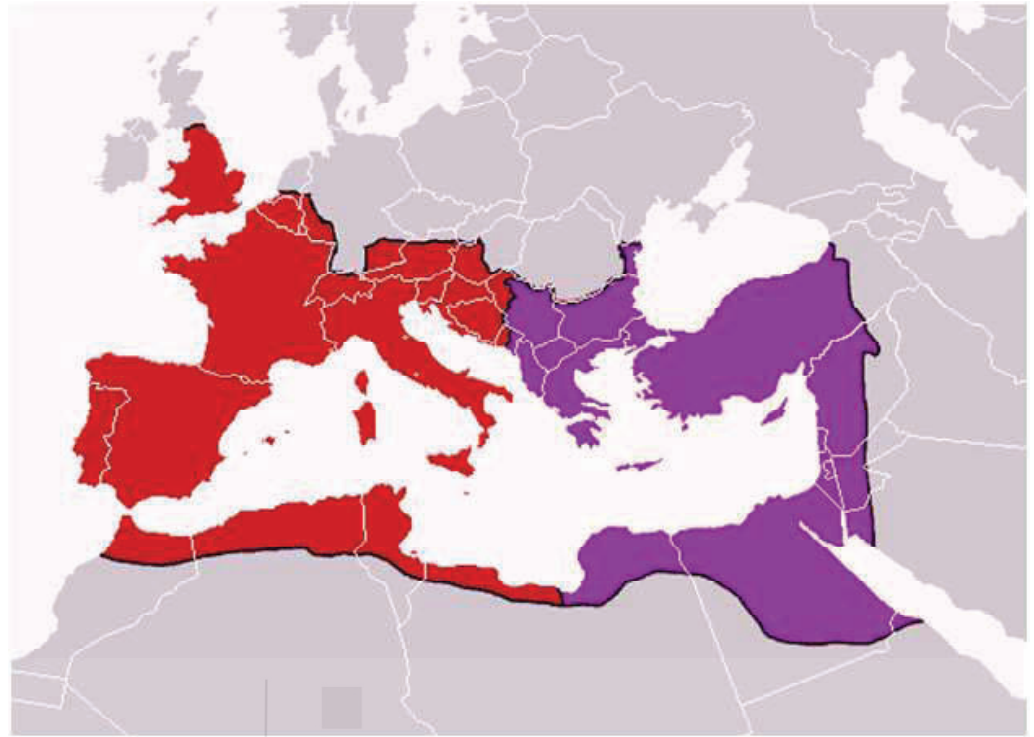
4.1 INTRODUCTION

The decline and fall of any socio-political formation is marked by intense historical speculation and analysis, more so the Roman Empire, undoubtedly the largest empire of the ancient world. The Roman Empire, at its peak, in the second century CE, was spread over most of western and eastern Europe, north Africa, and parts of west Asia, including the Arabian Peninsula, covering approximately 6,500,000 kilometres. A series of irreversible crises beset in Rome from the third century CE onwards, leading to political, economic, military, and social upheavals, and the empire staggered towards its demise. The conjunction of crises – internally, the disintegration and systemic breakdown and externally, the repeated Germanic invasions – dealt severe blows and resulted in the gradual collapse of the Western Roman Empire.

4.2 BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

The classic conundrum of pre-modern scholarship – What led to Roman decline? – has witnessed legions of scholars propounding various theories towards an explanation. Earlier, the theories for the crisis and decline of Imperium Romanum (Latin for Roman Empire) emphasized upon a primary reason. Historians conjecture that it was the combination of numerous factors that led to the gradual decline of the empire. Many theories of causality have been explored and most of these point out the disintegration of political, economic, military, and other social institutions, in tandem with Germanic incursions and usurpers from within the empire of Rome. Additionally, after the empire stopped expanding its territories from the third century CE onwards, it lost the immediate benefits of revenue from conquering new lands and resorted to increasing taxation from its own citizens.

The decline, viewed retrospectively, occurred over a period of three centuries. The efforts of Diocletian and Constantine at the political, economic, and administrative restructuring of the Roman state enabled it to withstand the crisis of the third century but the fifth century brought heavier blows. By the end of the fourth century, Germanic tribes had entered the empire all along the Rhine and Danube, and set up virtually independent kingdoms of their own. In 410 CE, Rome was sacked by Alaric, a Visigoth chief. And while some modern historians question the significance of the date, the final dissolution of the Western Roman Empire is widely recognized as occurring on September 4, 476 CE when Odoacer, deposed Emperor Romulus, bringing to an end the line of western emperors. The Western Roman Empire wielded negligible military, political, or financial power and had no effective control over the scattered western domains that could still be described as Roman.



Map 4.1: Map of the boundaries of the Western and Eastern Roman Empire after the death of Theodosius I, in 395 CE

Credit: Geuiwogbil at en.wikipedia

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Theodosius_I%27s_empire.png

Crisis of the Third Century

‘In some ways it is remarkable that the Roman Empire survived the third century CE at all. The civil wars, foreign invasions, plagues and other calamities it suffered for more than half a century after 235 CE would have been enough to cause the terminal disintegration of most empires. But centripetal patriotism, a loyalty to the idea as much as to the reality of Rome, proved in the end just strong enough to ensure the empire’s survival, for a while. It survived, however, in a different form and at a price that grew steadily more crushing, financially, socially and politically’ (Rodgers 2009: 218).

Two hundred years of *Pax Romana* (the Roman peace) ironically ended with the third century crisis. Politically, the half century from 235-284 was rife with civil wars, where for the first time Roman soldiers were killed fighting each other. There were at least fifty claimants to the imperial throne and twenty six emperors who ruled, of whom twenty five were murdered. The problem of succession became acute and was never unanimously resolved. Outbreaks of plague decimated the population and as the empire suffered internal convulsions, it became easy prey for invasions. Even towns like Athens and Tarragona, far removed from the borders were attacked in the 260s. The inevitable economic repercussions were the increase in taxation and debasement of currency.

4.3 THE LATE ROMAN EMPIRE

The crisis of the third century came to an end with the reign of Aurelian, also known as the ‘Restorer of the Order’, and more firmly with reign of Diocletian (284-305 CE), who streamlined the affairs of the empire with the system of governance known as *Tetrarchy* (rule of four). Diocletian divided the empire into two, by appointing Maximian as Augustus, the co-emperor in 286. In 293, he further appointed Galerius and Constantius as junior co-emperors (*Caesars*). Under this tetrarchy the empire was thus effectively split into four autonomous parts of which each one was ruled by an

emperor. Diocletian ruled the eastern region (Nicomedia); Maximian ruled Italy and Africa; Constantius ruled Spain, Gaul and Britain; and Galerius ruled Illyricum, Macedonia and Greece. However, dynastic ambitions led to the end of the Tetrarchy, and Constantine upon becoming emperor, presided again over a unified empire but shifted the seat of empire from Rome to Constantinople (now Istanbul in Turkey). He stopped the persecution of the Christians, and was baptized on his death-bed. With this the political role of Rome came to an end.



Map 4.2: Map of the Roman Empire during the first Tetrarchy

Credit: Coppermine Photo Gallery (CPG)

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tetrarchy_map3.jpg

It was during the reign of Theodosius (379-395 CE) that Christianity became the state religion, and all heathen sects were prohibited. Theodosius partitioned the empire between his two sons – Arcadius who ruled the eastern part (Byzantine) with the support of the Visigoths, and the Western Roman Empire went to Honorius who ruled from Rome with the backing of the Vandals.

The most life-altering change in the Late Roman Empire was the continuous incursions and skirmishes of the Germanic tribes, themselves escaping Central Asian groups like the Huns, which caused the collapse of the borders. A number of Germanic tribes (branches of the Goths, Vandals, Surbi, Alani, and Burgundians) kept pushing into and occupying the Roman territory. The capital shifted from Rome to the more defensible Ravenna in 404 CE and in 410 CE, Visigoths attacked and plundered Rome. In 455 CE, Rome was invaded by the Vandals, and in 476 CE, with the deposition of Romulus Augustulus, the Western Roman Empire ceased to exist. Even the Eastern Roman Empire was much weakened with loss of a number of territories. This weakened eastern empire came to be referred as the Byzantine Empire. One last attempt was made by the Byzantine emperor Justinian I (527-63 CE) to revive and unify the empire by conquering Italy. But to no avail. New socio-economic structures emerged in the West but the existing Roman institutions were not abolished or dissolved. However, the army was completely under the control of the new rulers.

4.4 POLITICAL ANARCHY

Politically, the Roman state rested on a system of power sharing and balance between its three main components – the emperor, the senatorial oligarchy, and the army. It was the weakening of all these formative elements, coupled with the vexing issue of imperial succession that became the political undoing of the Western Empire. From the end of the second century CE, the army began playing a decisive role in the selection of the emperor and the relationship between the Senate and the army gradually broke down. Centrifugal tendencies asserted themselves and political anarchy became the order of the day.

‘Till the middle of the third century CE the Roman state remained theoretically a republic. The people were supposed to have delegated their authority to the emperor who ruled on their behalf. In actual practice, the emperor was selected from among the oligarchy. The hereditary principle remained very weak and there were very few dynastic successions. The monarchy was essentially elective in nature. According to Edward Gibbon, ‘the emperor was elected by the authority of the Senate, and the consent of the soldiers’ (Farooqui, 2001: 260).

4.4.1 Military Government

In the third century, Septimius Severus (r.193-211 CE), the first emperor of the Severan dynasty made the army an integral part of governance and consequently, the imperial mantle became the pawn of ambitious generals. This transformation of the civil government to a military despotism increased the financial needs of the state. The assassination of the last Severan ruler, Alexander Severus (r.222-235 CE), by his own troops and the lack of clear rights of succession led to long periods of civil unrest that witnessed an array of puppet rulers, with short-lived reigns, who were controlled by the military dictatorships.

After the third century, the empire faced military challenges in the shape of barbarian incursions that were more immediate, and the might of the Sassanid Empire in Asia. Military reforms carried out by Diocletian in the late third and early fourth centuries CE reintroduced **conscription** and Rome continued to increase the size of its army, which numbered 650,000 men by the fourth century CE. The state’s demand of taxes, to maintain this expanded army, was three times higher than that prevailing at the end of the Republic. According to A.H.M. Jones, over-taxation accelerated the decline of the Roman Empire (1964). Moreover, the division of the army into civil militia posted at the borders, and the more experienced military officers being stationed closer to the emperor also boomeranged for the empire.

4.4.2 Crisis of Governance

The fact that the administrative machinery of a small city-state was being used to govern a far-flung empire made the fall of the empire a foregone conclusion. This crisis of governance was compounded by the corruption rampant in all ranks of the ruling class. Political instability was the outcome that stemmed from this hunger for power, greed, and sense of entitlement. Amongst many other reasons, the historian Bryan Ward-Perkins (2005) argues that the downfall of the empire was caused, in no small measure, by a vicious circle of corrupt governments and political instability.

Being the Roman emperor was always a particularly dangerous job, but during the tumultuous second and third centuries, it nearly became a death sentence. Civil wars thrust the empire into chaos and the **Praetorian Guards** – the select troops stationed in Rome – assassinated and installed new sovereigns at will, and once even auctioned the spot off to the highest bidder. The political rot extended to the Roman Senate too,

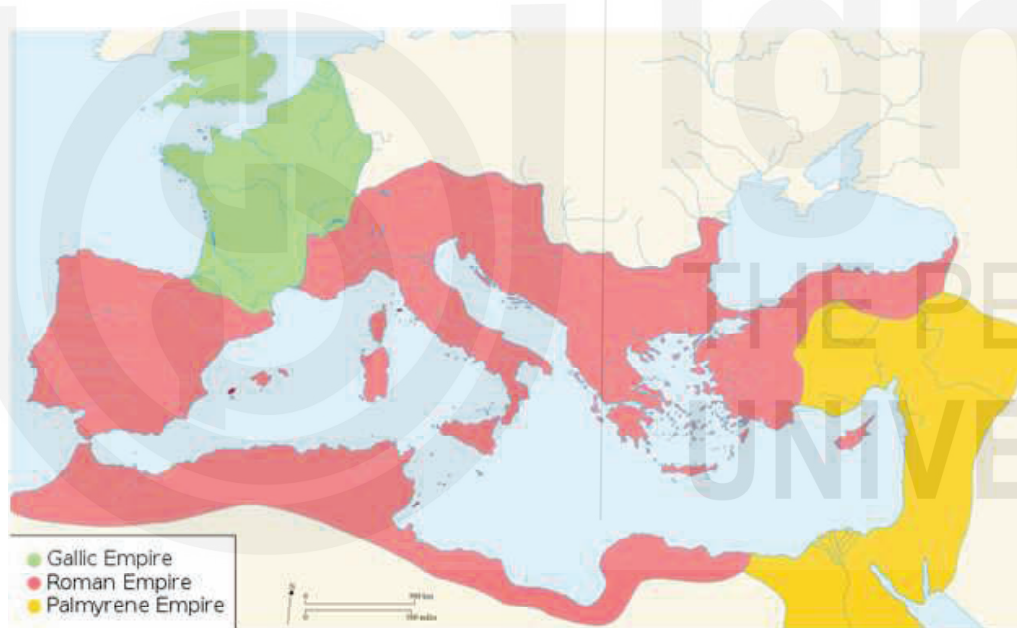
which failed to temper the excesses of the emperors due to its own widespread corruption and incompetence.

4.4.3 Civil Wars

Civil wars became endemic to the Late Roman Empire. Besides the exceptions of Diocletian and Constantine, emperors had short-lived reigns and the norm was constant fighting amongst powerful generals. The most detrimental effect of this civil strife was the disruption of the far-reaching trade network that had developed with the construction of roads and highways. As conditions became unfavourable for travel, long distance commercial transactions were given up for more localized economies. Civil wars fundamentally contributed to political mayhem and made effective governance untenable.

4.4.4 Political Fragmentation

The gradual dismemberment and administrative divisioning of the empire also led to its weakening. By about 258 CE, two large regions broke away from the main Roman Empire and transformed into the independent Gallic state and the Palmyrene state. Comprising the provinces of Gaul, Britain, and Hispania, the Gallic empire lay to the north and west of Rome. The Palmyrene Empire in the east consisted of the provinces of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt.



Map 4.3: Map of the Ancient Rome 271 CE

Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Ancient_Rome_271_AD.svg

Administratively, the empire was divided into two units – the Western Roman Empire and the Eastern Roman Empire – by Emperor Diocletian in 284 CE, and control shifted between the emperors of the two regions. The functioning of the Tetrarchy or Rule of Four (for details, see **Section 4.3**) demanded an increase in the number of troops in each region, thus adding to the tax burden of the citizens. Seeking to increase imperial control, Diocletian's administrative reforms further divided the twenty provinces of the empire into hundred. The once-unified Roman Empire was thus further parcellized by this increase in the size of the bureaucracy.

4.4.5 Breakdown of the Political Machinery

The collective reigns of Diocletian and Constantine could only stall the irreversible decline of the empire, which was progressively deteriorating. Constantine's death in 337 CE

was followed by an army mutiny, and assassinations of his family members. In 340 CE, Constantine II, Constans I and Constantinus II, his three surviving sons, divided the empire between themselves but mutual suspicion and feuding led to their ends and ended the reign of Julian (361-363 CE), the last pagan emperor, who died fighting the Persians. Emperors, Valentinian (364-375 CE; Western Roman Empire) and Valens (364-378 CE; Eastern Roman Empire), tried unsuccessfully to address the crises engulfing Rome, and Valens was killed fighting the Visigoths in the Battle of Adrianople in August 378 CE. This defeat, according to Edward Gibbon, was the crucial turning point in Rome's history, with its doom now writ large.

The reign of Theodosius I (379-395 CE) saw a rebel general in Britain, Magnus Maximus, proclaimed emperor by his troops in 383 CE, and he ruled the westernmost three provinces from Trier in Gaul. By 395 CE, after another round of civil wars resulted in the division of the empire, it was divided between Arcadius in the east and Honorius in the west. The death of Stilicho, the Romanized Vandal and regent of Honorius in 408 CE, led to repeated invasions of Italy by the Visigoths and the sack of Rome in 410 CE.

4.4.6 The Rise of the Eastern Empire

The fate of the western empire was partially sealed in the late third century CE, when Emperor Diocletian divided the empire into two halves – the Western Empire seated in the city of Milan, and the Eastern Empire with its capital at Nova Roma. In 330 CE, Constantine transferred the imperial capital to Nova Roma and gave the city his name, which henceforth became Constantinople. In 395 CE, Emperor Theodosius tacitly recognized that the empire was too vast to be governed by a single individual and divided it between his two sons. This division into the eastern and western empire proved to be permanent.

In the short term, this division perhaps made the empire governable, but over time the two halves drifted apart. East and West failed to work in a concerted manner to combat external threats, and the two often squabbled over resources, and military finances and postings. As the gulf widened, the largely Greek-speaking Eastern Empire grew in wealth, while the Latin-speaking West descended into multifold crises. Most importantly, the strength of the Eastern Empire served to divert the ongoing invasions to the West. While emperors like Constantine ensured that the city of Constantinople was fortified and well-guarded, Italy and the city of Rome, which now only had symbolic value, were left vulnerable.

4.5 MILITARY DECLINE

The might of Rome rested on, and was perpetuated by, its large army. Providing fodder to later military lore, the Roman state, from its incipient stage itself, incorporated the functioning and victories of its armies as a driving force. Rome's journey from a small city-state, to dominating the Latin League, and then becoming the unrivalled master of the Mediterranean and western world was achieved through military strength and prowess. However, the Roman *hoplite* army, its *legions* and functioning in *phalanxes* also carried schismatic seeds, and this became evident in the rise of generals like Sulla, Marius, Pompey, and Gaius Julius Caesar.

The period of *Pax Romana* brought with it peace but also the beginning of the end for Roman military supremacy. Territorial over-expansion and the compulsive military overspending could not amend, and in fact, began to cripple the system. And the weakening of the legions and growing number of mercenaries diluted the once-unified spirit of the army, and led to it losing of its cutting edge.

4.5.1 Over-expansion and Military Overspending

Roman army was the key factor in the expansion and protection of the Roman Empire and it was headed by the emperor. After the downfall of the Republic, the soldiers were being used for political advancement by the army generals. In the late Roman Empire, Diocletian reorganized the army and introduced conscription. In the late empire a large number of barbarian volunteers were incorporated into the army and these barbarian volunteers provided many elite regiments. After the conversion of Constantine and the defeat of Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge the character of the aristocracy across the empire as a whole was radically transformed by the great institutional change of Constantine's reign, the Christianization of the state. A number of newly converted Christians were appointed to the important positions in the administration and this had a transformative impact on the nature of the later Roman state. Most of the newly converted Christians were recruited from the East and a number of them became members of the second senate developed in Constantinople. The establishment of the Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, threatened the secular fabric of the state. The clerical bureaucracy was a new addition and over time it became more powerful than the secular bureaucracy of the Roman state.

The command of the military was in the hands of *magister equitum* and below them were the *duces* of the *limitanci* and the *Comites* of the *comitatness*, all possessing commands which were exclusively military. In the reign of Valentinian I (r. 364-375 CE) forts and camps were constructed with a rational layout.

Writing in the fifth century, the Roman historian, Vegetius urged for reform of what must have been a greatly weakened army. At its height, the Roman Empire stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to River Euphrates in west Asia. Historians reckon that its grandeur may also have been responsible for its downfall. With such a vast territory to govern, the empire faced an administrative and logistical nightmare. Even with their excellent road systems, the Romans were unable to communicate rapidly enough to manage their holdings. Rome struggled to marshal enough troops and resources to defend its frontiers from local rebellions and outside attacks. By the second century, the Emperor Hadrian (r. 117-138 CE) was compelled to build the defensive wall in Britain named after him.

By the end of the second century CE there was no further territorial expansion. In fact, as it tottered towards its end, the Roman state resorted to a defensive policy with regard to the Germanic tribes and sought to increase the strength of the army. From 250,000 regular troops at the time of the death of Augustus, the Roman army stood at 650,000 men in the fourth century. The need to maintain a huge army, made the state enact heavy economic laws, which although to the big nobles and slave owners interests, alienated large sections of the people.

4.5.2 Weakening of the Roman *Legions*

Adrian Goldsworthy (2009), a British military historian, is of the opinion that the collapse of the Western Roman Empire occurred not due to any general decadence but due to the weak Roman *legions*. Once the envy of the ancient world, Rome's military by the period of its decline was a motley group of opportunistic adventurers. Unable to recruit enough soldiers from their citizen body, emperors like Diocletian and Constantine began hiring foreign mercenaries to meet the state's military needs. The change in the composition and nature of the *legions* was also impacted by the overall decline in the economy. The best troops were stationed in core areas, close to the imperial centres of control, and not at the frontiers, which were in any case porous. And by the fourth century CE, as the government tried to tide over an economic crisis by paying salaries in kind, in the form of rations of food and clothing, the *legions* could not be saved.

4.5.3 Influx of Mercenary Soldiers

The policy of inducting foreign mercenaries to prop up the armies led to the ranks of Roman *legions* swelling up with Germanic Goths, and other tribes. While these soldiers of fortune proved to be fierce warriors, they also had little or no loyalty to the empire, and their power-hungry commanders often turned their men against the Roman state.

In 378 CE, as the nomadic Huns from Central Asia invaded West Asia and East Europe, the Visigothic tribe got into a skirmish with the Romans in modern-day Turkey. They forced Rome to allow the settlement of their people within the empire’s borders. The Roman practice of hiring mercenary soldiers eventually led to the Germanic soldiers outnumbering the Romans in the imperial army. Tragically, many of the barbarians who sacked the city of Rome had earned their military stripes while serving in the Roman *legions*. For example, the Visigoth soldiers worked against the empire and turned on Roman citizens and plundered the city of Rome in 410 CE.

4.5.4 Army No Longer a Reliable Instrument of Coercion

Another problem faced by the Roman state in the fifth century CE was that the army was no longer reliable as an instrument of coercion, as many of the armies sent to crush rebellions and invasions signed contracts to share the booty. In the first half of the fifth century CE, rebellions were continuous – the most successful being the Bucandae revolt in central and western France, which even spread to Spain in the sixth century CE. Bucandae had independent military command, system of taxation, and advocated severing of links with Rome. The very fact that Bucandae was being sustained by runaway peasants, and the army’s inability to control them or allow their existence, points to deep seated structural flaws. First, it indicates the continuous class struggle between the *latifundists* and the *proletarii*, and secondly, the deepening chasm between the state and its army, the primary fighting-cum-coercion force.

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) Describe the developments that took place during the reign of Diocletian, with special emphasis on Tetrarchy.

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- 2) What were the major factors that led to political anarchy in the late Roman Empire? State any four factors.

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- 3) How did overspending and influx of mercenary soldiers affect the institution of army in the late Roman Empire? Explain.

4.6 ECONOMIC CRISIS

Reorganization of Roman state in the 4th Century CE produced a temporary growth in the urban development and restored monetary stability with the issue of gold coins. But both recoveries were limited. The urban growth was largely concentrated in new military and administrative centres. This growth was patronized by the emperors and Milan, Sardica and above all Constantinople became important urban centres in the late Roman Empire. According to Perry Anderson (1974) urban trade and industry progressively declined in all provinces of late Roman Empire. In the later empire the policy of increased taxation was pursued by the Roman state. This policy was successful in the east but it produced crisis in Western part of the empire.

The enlargement and maintenance of the military required the imposition of higher taxes. To raise more money and to cover escalating costs, baser metals were added to the previously all-silver coins, which led to inflation. Successive devaluation of the coinage produced an economic crisis and hyperinflation. The increasing military expenditure proved most back-breaking for the agriculture sector. The steep rise and harsher enforcement of tax collection compelled many farmers to abandon their farms – land remained fallow, and the movement to the cities, to join the ranks of the urban poor, put a heavy strain on urban centres, which often could not support this increasing population.

4.6.1 Falling Economy, High Inflation and Absentee Landlordism

Even as Rome was under attack from external forces, it was crumbling from within owing to a severe economic crisis. Constant wars and oppressive taxation and inflation had widened the gap between the rich and poor. The Romans had no budgetary system and thus wasted whatever resources were available to them. ‘To make matters worse, the wars of the third and fourth century, yielded next to nothing in the way of new areas to exploit or of booty. While tremendous amounts of wealth had poured into Italy during the latter years of the Republic, and which subsequently were used to finance purchases and projects throughout the empire. In short, an increasingly unstable and irresponsible government, which could not resort to the modern expedient of balancing receipts and expenditures by creating an imperial debt, had to exact larger and larger revenues by taxes and forced requisitions upon an economy, which was at least static, and which actually may have been undergoing an overall decline.’ ([www.cupola.gettysburg.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1011 & context = contemporary-sec1](http://www.cupola.gettysburg.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1011&context=contemporary-sec1)).

The economy of the empire was a raubwirtschaft or plunder economy based on exploiting existing resources rather than producing anything new. Historians such as Arnold J. Toynbee (1965) categorize the Roman Empire as a thoroughly exploitative rotten system that lacked rational taxation policies. He argues that the empire could never have lasted longer than it did without radical financial reforms, which no emperor could have implemented.

The economic crisis being faced by the Late Empire was accentuated by an exploitative revenue collection system, and the practice of absentee landlordism. The policy of greater centralization and excessive taxation, adopted by Diocletian and Constantine, to overhaul the functioning of the Roman state, succeeded in the east but aggravated the crisis in the west. The oligarchy passed on the burden of increasing taxation to the peasants, *coloni*, artisans, and petty traders, adversely affecting all sectors of the economy.

At the local level, tax collection was in the hands of *decuriones* or *curiales*, who were part of the local elite and with time, became a hereditary group. They colluded with the privileged sections and underassessed their land, to help them evade taxation. The smaller landlords' land, on the other hand, was often overassessed. The absentee landlords passed on their own tax liabilities by exacting illegal cesses from the less privileged sections. A.H.M. Jones (1964) is of the opinion that in the Western Roman Empire, a corrupt and inefficient aristocracy presided over the administrative and revenue affairs of the state. And when they could not determine the choice of emperor, they became uncooperative, and withdrew to their power bases in the countryside.

4.6.2 Crisis of Subsistence

There was a gradual ruralization of the Empire. But in rural areas far-reaching changes were taking place and new mode of production began to come into existence. In the Antiquity the slave mode of production was connected to a system of political and military expansion. Now the imperial frontier had ceased to advance in the late Roman Empire. The slaves therefore were converted by landowners into dependent tenants to the soil. The villages of small holders and free tenants lost their independent character to the landlords in search for protection against fiscal extortions and conscription by the state and their economic position had become like ex-slaves. In this way from the second century CE onwards the free peasants started to lose their independent status and they were tied to that of landlords' estate. The emperors of the later Roman Empire from Diocletian to Valens and Arcadius had proclaimed that tenants were to be regarded as bound to their villages for the purposes of tax collection. Thereafter the judicial powers of landlords had been increased over the dependent tenants (*coloni*) in the 4th and 5th centuries. But the slavery did not disappear with these changes and the state structure was still based on slavery in the later Roman Empire and it also continued till the end of the empire in the West. The role of slaves in urban artisanal production began to decline, but they were still the backbone of household services for the patricians.

The whole economic system of late Roman Empire was based on the relationships between the dependent rural producer, the landlord and the state. In the later Roman Empire the rise of army and bureaucratic machine had become very vast and the late Roman state imposed various kinds of taxes to fulfil the needs of vast state machinery. The citizens were taxed in the form of unpaid military service for the state and they had to procure their own fighting equipment. According to Marx, 'It was through wars that the Roman Patricians destroyed the plebeians, by compelling them to serve as soldiers...and made paupers of them.' Another kind of compulsory services was to be performed by the common people for the state. These services were known as *angaria*. For these type of services the labouring people could be hired for official purposes like carrying loads, construction of buildings and making roads without paying the wages.

There is a general unanimity among historians that from the third century onwards, with progressive abandonment of land, civil wars, famines, and recurrent plagues in epidemic proportion, large sections of the population faced a crisis of subsistence. Underpopulation and depopulation led to further shortage of agricultural labour.

While senators and the like were privileged enough to get tax exemption, big landlords managed to get their land under assessed. The smaller landlords' land was often over assessed and they had to face the burden of heavy taxation. Even of the bigger landlords' large estates, much of the land was marginal land, which with the rising ratio of taxation became a liability rather than an asset. Thus arose the pressure from landlords to shift the pressure of taxation to the peasantry by increasing the rent take-over. Taxation, coupled with the decline of gang-slavery resulted in the disruption of the whole process of production, and consequently, subsistence itself became a struggle.

4.6.3 Decline in Artisanal Production and Long Distance Trade

The process of empire building and Romanization was carried out in three stages. These included, improved communication systems, cultivation of many Italian crops, and the export of agricultural surplus (corn, wine, and oil) to other parts of Europe. Coinciding with these developments was a decline in the demand for Roman commodities, especially in France. Imported commodities in Rome were cheaper than those manufactured within Italy. According to Rostovtzeff (1926), the burden of heavy taxation and high cost of slaves led to the decline of artisanal production, and with prices of commodities falling due to competition, organization of indigenous production was no longer profitable.

Almost simultaneously, the economy experienced a decline in trade, especially long distance trade. The Roman social formation was very exploitative and the wealth of the senatorial oligarchy in the third century CE was nearly five times greater than their predecessors in the first century CE. Their conspicuous consumption and ostentatious lifestyle sustained trade in luxury goods, especially from the east. Romans achieved the unification of the Mediterranean world and brisk seaborne trade plied along its shores – Ostia, and then Portus were the serving harbours of Rome, and their status and fortune were linked to the city. However, as political chaos and financial crisis hit Rome, long distance trade became a casualty. And while Rome declined, Alexandria and Antioch continued to prosper, and Constantinople rose to prominence in the fourth century CE.

4.6.4 Increased Monetary Pressure, Fiscal Crisis and Return to a Natural Economy

The post second century phase saw military anarchy, with numerous uprisings from the third century onwards. This period of political anarchy witnessed various pretenders imposing additional and arbitrary levies to carry on their incessant warfare. Seven distinct emperors issued coinage in the year 238 CE and eventually, monetary anarchy resulted in the economically powerful provinces resisting Rome, and its centralized taxation. The combined effect of all this was an increased fiscal pressure on direct producers, affecting the agricultural cycle, and consequently leading to the disorganization of the entire production process.

Increased state pressure generated a monetary crisis, which led to unprecedented fluctuations in currency. Over-expenditure by the state to wage wars from the second century onwards, and the various military failures of the third century, produced a galloping inflation. The Roman state collected its revenue in gold and silver, not copper or bronze. The amount of baser elements i.e. copper and bronze increased as inflation continued. During the reign of Constantine, gold currency was stabilized but copper currency still remained unstable. Due to this monetary dualism, good money was driven out of circulation by bad money, and gold and silver coins were hoarded domestically rather than being used for trade and commerce. Trade transactions got affected and the restoration of coinage invariably led to more hoarding.

The ratio of inflation towards the end of the empire was tremendous. There was financial and demographic crisis during this period. Despite the reforms attempted by Diocletian, there was considerable inflation as reflected in the price freeze known as the Edict of Prices. In Egypt, one solidus (gold currency) in 301 CE was valued at 4000 drachmas or copper coins, and in 400 CE it equaled 130 million drachmas. Such devaluation led to a crisis reflected in a high rise in prices, which in turn forced a return from monetary to barter economy. The gradual market acceptance of one measure of wheat equaling six drachmas and other such conversions threw the whole circulation system out of gear.

With the finances disorganized and state expenses rising, the state itself faced unaccustomed pressure. Taxes in kind – wheat and olive oil – were introduced and soldiers too began receiving pay in kind. In a certain sense, there was a return to a ‘natural economy’. Although the higher officials and generals were still being paid in cash, inflation hit their lifestyle. Uncontrolled inflation led to a virtual collapse of industrial and artisanal production. Money was required to pay the invading hordes and the flow of bullion from Rome to China and India due to the eastern trade, along the Silk Route and Spice Route, further compounded the monetary problem. All quarters of the economy suffered grievous setbacks, and Italy soon ceased to be the hub of commerce.

4.7 SOCIAL UPHEAVALS

The fractures and dividing lines between the haves and have-nots that form part of any social formation got congealed over time, and other issues added to the growing social tensions and ruptures within Roman society. To the initial issues of social justice, inclusion, and grant of citizenship, the expansion of the empire brought home other irresolvable conflicts. The conspicuous consumption of the elite isolated them from the masses on whose exploitation their lifestyle rested. From the third century CE, decline in population and the growing ranks of army and officialdom, made it harder for the lower classes to sustain the superstructure of the state, and rioting and brigandage became common. All of this happened alongside, and it was the result of widespread corruption, misuse of power, and the fading of the Roman civic spirit. Christianity went from a persecuted faith to becoming the dominant religion, and its clerical organization was often co-opted, and became analogous to the state.

The sharp class divisions that defined Roman society from the beginning got reformulated with each successive phase. By the time of the Late Roman Empire, the propertied class was the Equestrian class that enjoyed social prestige and economic wealth in all parts of the empire. It became customary to grant Roman citizenship and equestrian status to men in the provinces too; and in return, they were loyal to the state, and appointed to prominent positions in the civil and military administration. Other social groups that had a high social status were landowners, shopkeepers, traders, businessmen, and high-ranking employees. In the east, the higher bureaucracy emerged as a new hereditary aristocracy during this period.

The lower classes consisted of people who provided services to the higher classes, such as peasants, potters, teachers, entertainers, free labour, and even prostitutes. Skilled workers such as metalsmiths, bakers, and wool workers were organized in trade associations or *collegia*, which played an economic, social, and sometimes quasi-political role. And then there was slavery, facing its own internal contradictions and getting transformed into the colonate. The turbulent period leading to the decline of the Western Roman Empire made class differences acute, and as the government became more autocratic, to contain the economic doom, professions and posts were made hereditary.

Thus, related to the economic crisis was the unequal distribution of wealth. As the ranks of the lower peasantry got depleted, they joined the burgeoning group of *coloni* or dependent cultivators. Landownership and the subordination of peasants to landlords appeared, and there was hardly any difference between a legally free peasant and a slave. Peasants and slaves merged into a uniform class of the poor and from the second century onwards, there were a number of peasant rebellions, revolting not as peasants but as the dispossessed, allied with slaves. One should note that the glory of the Roman Empire was based on taxation of the peasantry. Meternus, who deserted from the army in 186 CE led a large-scale rebellion in Spain and France, described in the sources as one by ‘a numerous collection of rascals, runaway slaves and desperate men, which like other rebellions, met the same fate – a heavy armed suppression’.

4.7.1 Population Decline

The Germanic invasions chipped away at the already dwindling size of the Roman population. Population decline caused additionally by plagues and an overall population decrease from declining birth rates, added to the burden of increasing the size of the military. Two different plagues killed millions of Romans during the second and third centuries. The first, called the Antonine Plague, struck from 165 CE to about 180 CE, killing about 5 million Romans. The emperor, Marcus Aurelius, is thought to have died as a result of the plague, which is why it is named Antonine, after his family’s name, Antoninus. Then, from 251 to about 266 CE, an outbreak of smallpox, called the Plague of Cyprian, killed thousands. The disease greatly reduced the number of soldiers as well as farmers (Bundy 2011: 2).

The more inherent cause of the depopulation of the empire was the very existence, and extension of slavery, which denied slaves the natural reproductive rights. As the empire veered towards its end, there was a shift of population to the provinces, and also internal migration from rural to urban areas, to escape both, taxation pressure and losing money to moneylenders. Linked up with this socio-economic reason of deserting fields were the debilitating issues of development of marshy areas in undrained fields near the sea, and the spread of malaria.

The expansion of the empire territorially, and the associated rise in the number of soldiers and bureaucrats, put large numbers out of the production process. The increase in the number of unproductive people like the senators, bureaucrats, soldiers, and even the clergy as the state was integrated with the Church, put a continuous strain on the exchequer and demands made of the peasantry. A.H.M. Jones believes that the decline of trade and commerce should not be overemphasized and it was the disorganization of production with all its allied facets, including the maintenance of an unproductive section that gradually led to Rome’s terminal stage. The free grain distribution to the urban poor – 200,000 in Rome, and 80,000 in Constantinople – also presented an unavoidable dilemma to the state, more so at a time when production was stagnating and declining. The capital of the western empire – Rome, with its parasitic nature – embodied this problem of unproductive people siphoning off the resources of the state, and offering little in return.

4.7.2 Decline in Public Spirit

By the fourth century CE, the Roman state was being increasingly identified with the rich population. As the whole apparatus of the slave mode of production relied on effective bureaucratic control, development of excessive bureaucratization led to corruption, misuse of power, and misappropriation of revenues. This decline in the public spirit of the Empire became very evident from the third century onwards.

Another related cause was the rapid expansion of the Church – its apathy to the state and its teaching of salvation. It was Edward Gibbon, who first proposed that the decline of Rome dovetailed with the spread of Christianity, and some have argued that the rise of the new faith helped contribute to the Empire's fall. The Edict of Milan legalized Christianity in 313 CE, and from 380 CE it became the authorized religion of the state. These decrees ended centuries of persecution, but they may have also eroded the traditional Roman value system. Christianity displaced the polytheistic Roman religion, which conferred a divine status to the emperor, and expected due deference and loyalty to him. It also shifted focus away from the glory of the state on to a sole deity, and the pursuit of otherworldly salvation.

Meanwhile, Popes and other Church officials began playing an increased role in political affairs, further complicating governance. Despite Gibbon and his followers' advocating, the aforementioned theory has been widely discredited. While the spread of Christianity may have played a small role in curbing Roman civic virtue, most scholars now agree that its influence paled in comparison to the irremediable conjunction of administrative, economic, and military factors.

4.7.3 Brigandage

The social rebellions reached their zenith in the 390s. Apart from the peasant rebellions, brigandage was common on a large-scale in Later Roman society. It was a forceful expression of social disparity and protest. Bulla's brigandage (205-207 CE) was atypical example of a distorted form of social protest whereby runaway slaves and imperial freedmen united in large numbers in semi-formal regiments and sought social justice. They flourished with the support of local communities, and eluded capture for years together. Another form of protest was by escaping to the invaders en masse, and in fact, from the fourth century CE onwards, peasants welcomed the invaders as mitigators or emancipators of their suffering. They made attempts to imitating them. In 285-286 CE, the rural population rebelled against the imperial rule. The memory of the Bagaudae (fugitive peasant brigands) insurrection was kept alive by the peasants for years to come. In 407 CE, another powerful movement was named the 'Bagaudae'.

4.7.4 Shift of Aristocracy to the Countryside

As the empire shook under the impact of various tensions and disasters that it faced, imperial towns and cities also fell on hard times. The Roman elite – known variously as the Patricians, Optimates, Equites and Equestrians over time – derived their wealth from the countryside and agriculture, and lived in, and enjoyed the luxuries and amusements of the city. The cities were also administrative centres and hubs of economic activity, especially trade and specialized artisanal production. The lifestyle of conspicuous consumption that the rich enjoyed, as an expression of wealth, prestige, and power was supported by the goods and services provided by merchants, and master craftsmen. By the closing decades of the Roman Empire, long distance trade and craft production had collapsed. Repeated invasions, or threat of invasion, bred insecurity, and when unable to exercise control on choice of emperor, the aristocracy retreated to its enclaves in the countryside, where they were unequivocal lord, master, and patron. This move, however, left the cities vulnerable to outside attack, and ushered in a ruralization of the society and economy.

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) Discuss the state of economy in the late Roman Empire. What led to the crisis of subsistence?

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2) To what extent the position of lower classes and slaves in the Roman society contributed to the decline of the Roman empire?

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3) What led to ruralization of the society and economy in the late Roman Empire? Give reasons.

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4.8 CRISIS OF THE SLAVE MODE OF PRODUCTION

Historical Materialism¹, with its thesis of change in the mode of production triggering overall societal and civilizational change, espouses that it was the crisis of the slave mode of production that led to the decline of the Roman Empire. These scholars are unanimous in their view that ancient Rome was a slave society and not a society with slaves, and that slavery underpinned all its various facets. The power of the empire derived from brutal force and made possible thousands of war captives who were turned into bonded and servile labour, a mere tool of production (*instrumentum vocale*). The juridical and legal systems condoned, in fact validated, the ideological existence and practice of slavery. The post *Pax Romana* period, and the crises of the third century, laid bare the internal contradictions of slavery, and eventually when Rome was vulnerable and declining, the system of slavery too withered away, attributing to the final demise.

¹ It is the materialistic conception of history put forth by Karl Marx. It argues that history is not the result of ideas but result of changing materialistic conditions – from primitives, to slave mode of production to feudal, Asiatic and Capitalistic mode of productions.

The Roman Empire was racked by a labour deficit at the same time as its socio-economic troubles were mounting. Rome's economy depended on slaves to till its fields and work as craftsmen or in the petty bureaucracy; and its military had traditionally provided a fresh influx of conquered people for the purpose. But when expansion came to a halt in the second century, Rome's supply of slaves and other war treasure began to dry up. A further blow came in the fifth century, when the Vandals claimed North Africa, and began disrupting the empire's trade by prowling the Mediterranean as pirates.

With its economy faltering, and its commercial and agricultural production in decline, the Empire began to lose its grip on Europe. The number of slaves had increased dramatically during the first two centuries of the Roman Empire. The Romans' dependency on slave labour led not only to decline in morals, values, and ethics but also to economic backwardness and technological stagnation as there was no incentive to produce goods more efficiently. Joseph Tainter (1988) is of the view that the static technology resulted in a slow decline of the empire.

***Pax Romana* as a cause of crisis of slavery**

The unification of the Roman Empire and the establishment of *Pax Romana* or Roman Peace was a two centuries long period of Roman glory and cultural accomplishments, and extended from the reigns of Augustus (r. 27 BCE-14 CE) to Marcus Aurelius (r. 161-180 CE). While it gave the Early Empire a common Latin language, uniform coinage system and legal code, it had serious political and economic implications. With the establishment of Roman Peace, the supply of war captives, the most important source of slave supply, was estranged. Slave labour throughout history was unable to reproduce itself, and the Roman slave economy thus contained the seeds of collapse, which were inherent. In the 1st century CE, 40% of the Italian population comprised of slaves, hence a 40% that could not reproduce itself.

After the death of Emperor Trajan (98-117 CE), no new territories were added to the empire, and consequently, fewer opportunities to acquire war captives en masse and turn them into slaves. Piracy and other extra-legal methods continued but they could not provide the numbers, which the primary source of military victories could. The fall in supply of slaves created an unprecedented shortage, which led to the rising prices of slaves. The internal supply was further hit by the outbreak of plague in the third century that produced an overall shortage of manpower.

By the fifth century, with the external supply of labour restricted, and the free population of the conquered areas being given Roman citizen status, there was a demographic problem. So, the slaves were granted the right to develop loose family bonds, and some production in *latifundia* was entrusted to slave families attached to the land. The increasing grant of *peculium* (right to raise families, and property owned by slaves) led to their being huddled, and the decline of gang slavery. Apart from this, there developed a process known as *ablonate* by which the slaves were granted land (*servi casati*) and converted to tenancy. And even though there was a tax levied on it, more so in urban areas, a large number of slaves were manumitted (freed), to utilize their labour efficiently.

With large sections of the population being granted land – the whole empire was an internal market – the landlord was unable to collect rent. He divided his estate into two parts – the first being slave-cultivated, and the other cultivated by tenants. But due to shortage of labour, tenants were forced to work on the first part with, and as slaves. This can be seen as an instance of dormant serfdom. In the words of Ste Croix (1981) 'The inevitable consequence was that the propertied class could not maintain the same rate of profit from slave labour, and to prevent its standard of living from falling, was

driven to increase the rate of exploitation of the humbler free population, as I believe the Roman ruling class now actually did, by degrees’.

Colonate and Patrocinium

The stagnation in agriculture, labour crisis, and increased pressure of taxation by the state proved to be most devastating for the smaller peasants. Earlier the peasant had some ‘reserves’ with him but now with most of the surplus being alienated from him to resume cultivation, he had to borrow or take loans. The peasants thus got indebted and were reduced to the position of *coloni* or dependent tenants. The smaller peasants unable to bear the burden of tax themselves got under the service of bigger landlords, and were again, reduced to servile conditions. The category of sharecroppers was also turned into *coloni* and gradually, all three classes were tied to the landowners and bound to their plots, enabling the extortion of a larger share from them. Moreover, the taxation measures of Diocletian and the legal provisions of Constantine permanently attached the *coloni* to the soil, and they were to be transferred with the land if there was a change of ownership.

The phenomenon of *Patrocinium*² became widespread from the fourth century onwards. Sections of poor peasants, at times entire villages, voluntarily submitted to the big landowners or strong local commanders, to escape ravaging hordes or corrupt officials trying to fleece heavy taxation from them. The peasants received protection and were granted *Patrocinium* or tenancy rights but lost their freedom and ownership of land, and their status became virtually the same as *coloni*. In the long run, the practice of granting *patrocinium* created local centres of authority and thus weakened the administrative authority of the state, and deprived it of revenue.

‘We thus see that by various processes a uniform class of dependent peasant tenants tied to the soil came in existence in the western half of the Roman Empire by the third century CE. All such peasants were referred to as *coloni* (whatever might have been their earlier status) and included those slaves whose status had improved when they were settled on individual plots with their families. There was little to differentiate slaves of this type from the other *coloni*. The original *coloni* who had lost their freedom, the slaves whose status had been marginally improved when they became tenant cultivators, and depressed peasants (including those who had accepted *patrocinium*), became part of the broad status of *coloni* by the later Roman Empire. The *colonate*, or the new type of production based on the *coloni*, replaced *latifundia* driven surplus extraction, and represents a transitional phase between classical Greco-Roman slavery and classical medieval European feudalism’ (Farooqui, 2001: 295-96).

4.9 INCURSIONS OF THE GERMANIC TRIBES

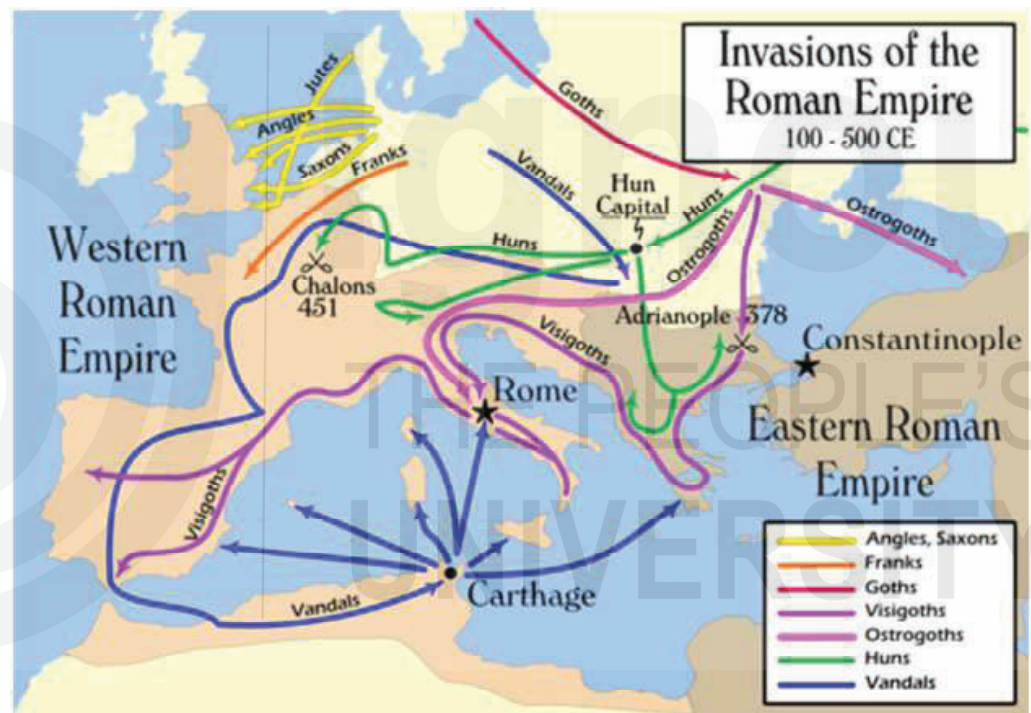
The most straightforward theory for the collapse of the Western Roman Empire pins its fall on a series of military losses sustained against the Germanic tribes. That the internal crisis coincided with the escalating external pressure compounded the situation, and tribes like the Vandals, Visigoths, and Ostrogoths captured control, carved out their own kingdoms and completed the process of Rome’s downfall. The Roman conquest of Gaul and parts of central Europe brought the empire face to face with nomadic groups of pastoralists, referred to collectively as Germanic tribes for they all spoke a language based on common Germanic, an Indo-European language. Originally inhabiting southern Scandinavia and regions along the Baltic coast, Germanic people, like the Cimbri and Teutones began moving southwards and westwards from c. 1000 BCE. It

² A Roman law/legal contract under which peasants agreed to serve the bigger landlords in lieu of food and shelter.

Roman Republic

is believed that contact with the Roman empire precipitated socio-economic changes and transformed relatively egalitarian agro-pastoralist social formations into warrior chieftaincies based on surplus appropriation and class differentiation.

Rome had tangled with Germanic tribes since the time of Augustus, and skirmishes and battles were common along the Rhine-Danube frontier. Initially, the tribes were too weak and scattered to challenge the might of the empire but from the period of Marcus Aurelius, pressure from other tribes led to open confrontations and Germanic populations started pushing into Roman areas. The state adopted a defensive policy, allowed Germanic settlements but simultaneously increased the strength of the Danubian army, to check the menace of increasing infiltration. In the first half of the third century CE, two northern Germanic tribes – the Alamanni and the Franks were the most formidable adversaries along the Rhine border, and the Danubian frontier was threatened by the Goths. The long European frontier was proving to be indefensible, and a compromise was reached allowing for selective settlement, recruitment into the army, and loyal Germanic chiefs were made collaborators, with their states acting as buffer states. However, the military option was never completely given up.



Map 4.4: Invasions of the Roman Empire

Credit: User:MapMaster

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Invasions_of_the_Roman_Empire_1.png

With a fresh wave of tribal movements in Eastern Europe in the mid-fourth century CE, things began to take a turn for the worse. The Goths had split into two groups, equally aggressive, the Visigoths (western Goths) and Ostrogoths (eastern Goths), who ceaselessly encroached the Empire's borders. Themselves on the run, escaping the sweeping Hun invasions, the Visigoths led by their chief Fritigern clashed with the Roman army in the Battle of Hadrianopolis/Adrianople in 378 CE. The Romans were defeated and Emperor Valens killed, marking a grave turning point in Rome's political destiny. The invincibility of Rome was now history and from the early fifth century CE, Germanic tribes such as the Vandals, Suebi, and the Alani began crossing the Rhine, and occupied the western provinces of Rome. In 410 CE, the Visigothic chief Alaric, successfully sacked the city of Rome and this assault reverberated in a demoralizing wave all over the empire. The empire spent the next several decades under constant threat before the 'Eternal City' was raided again in 455 CE, this time by the Vandals. Finally in 476 CE,

the Germanic leader Odoacer staged a revolt and deposed Emperor Romulus Augustulus (who was the last emperor of Western Roman Empire) and thus succeeded in delivering a fatal blow to the crumbling empire. Though the history of the interaction of the Romans and the Germanic people had begun with the latter being Romanized. The dethronement of the Western Roman emperor did not immediately lead to a break between antiquity and the medieval feudal society in Europe. It took centuries for this change to take shape. In various parts of the Roman Empire some tribal kingdoms arose that established new features in the society.

4.10 HISTORIOGRAPHY: CRISIS, DECLINE AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Citing the disasters of the fifth century CE as an adequate reason, western historians from the eighteenth century onwards, have treated the year 476 as the terminal point of the Roman Empire. It marked the end of Greco-Roman antiquity and the beginning of the Middle Ages. However, many others have argued that no satisfactory date for the 'fall' of Rome can be ascertained for the decline occurred over a long period of time. And perhaps the crises and end of the empire were embedded in its structural flaws, and over-expansive imperial nature. While earlier scholarship treated the deposition of Emperor Romulus Augustulus as the critical moment of transition, more recent works on European history have pushed back the date of the onset of the Medieval period to c. 300 CE. Thus, the Late Empire and its successor states form a period of change, a metamorphosis from classical antiquity to feudal Europe.

The transformation and continuation of the Empire are stressed emphatically, with reference to Byzantium. The Eastern Roman Empire that morphed into the Byzantine Empire, with its capital at Constantinople, continued for another thousand years after the 'fall' of Rome. 'Scholars have continued to come forward in defence of continuity in the western parts of the empire – no-one has ever seriously maintained that there was any marked break in the east between ancient and Byzantine civilization' (Vogt, 1967: 5).

The theme of the decline of the Roman Empire is a much contested arena. In terms of intellectual scholarship, it was introduced by one of the most influential modern historians, Edward Gibbon, in his multi-volume book, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776). Gibbon, reflecting the anti-clerical rationalism of the Enlightenment of the 18th century blamed Christianity, charging that it destroyed the civic spirit of the Romans, and the Church usurped political power from the state. In the 19th century, as advances were made in the historical method, varied perspectives related to the Roman decline were suggested. Exponents of historical materialism, Marx and Engels contended that since slavery had engulfed all forms of labour, and was now becoming extinct, the Roman world reached an impasse.

In the early 20th century, the Russian scholar, Michael Rostovtzeff (1926) attributed the decline to social tensions and to the constant pressure exerted by the underprivileged masses to gain a share in the power and wealth of the rulers. The English historian, F.W. Walbank (1946), regarded slavery as the root cause of the technological paralysis and general loss of vitality in the Roman world. Scholars offering an anthropological interpretation of the change point to population decline, its racial dilution – the influx of Greeks and Orientals diluted the original Roman sense of unity and to the shrinking ruling class as the primary causes of this debacle. Thus, the German historian O. Seeck, believed that the political aspect of the Roman world was a systematic 'extermination of the best', leaving a vacuum to be filled by men of inferior worth, that eventually proved to be fatal for the Empire.

A host of scholars have added fresh insights to the subject of the Roman decline. J.B. Bury (1897), E. Stein, A. Piganiol were all scholars of repute of Late Antiquity and Byzantium attached to different European Universities, and furthered the debate on Roman decline through their teaching and research. A. Dopsch contended that the Germanic invasions did not represent a complete break with the Roman past, and that the Germanic states that emerged on its ruins continued with Roman practices, and institutions, especially in the realm of statecraft and governance. S. Mazzarino, the leading 20th century Italian historian of ancient Rome, held that the death of Rome came about as a result of decadence and economic mismanagement. A.H.M. Jones' (1964) authoritative work marked a watershed in the scholarship on the subject. He stressed on the geographic and socio-economic factors and opined that as the Western Roman Empire advanced through the Rhine and Danube areas, conflict with the Germanic tribes became inevitable. This led to an increase in the strength of the armed forces, and related pressure of taxation borne by the direct producers was the fundamental cause of this decline.

The two stalwarts of universal history, who made valuable contributions to the study of Roman decline, are Oswald Spengler (1926) and A.J. Toynbee (1965). Spengler posited that the disintegration of the Western Roman Empire formed an intermediate stage between the ancient world and its successor states. Toynbee held the belief that the collapse of *Imperium Romanum* was due to the combined attack of the internal proletariat and external proletariat. More recently, archaeologists working with chemical analysis of the skeletal remains recovered from the 1st century CE have concluded that ancient Romans were succumbing to chronic lead poisoning, for their food and wine were heavily contaminated with lead. Bryan Ward-Perkins (2006) engages more substantially with archaeology in his assessment of the Roman decline. He points out that there was an extraordinary fall in the material culture of later Roman centuries and believes that, 'the Western Roman Empire was brought down by a specific military crisis – Germanic invasion, made more serious by the arrival in the West of an Asiatic people, the Huns, and exacerbated by civil wars within the empire – rather than by an irreversible internal decline'.³

Check Your Progress-3

- 1) The crisis of the Third Century rang the death knell for the Roman Empire. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.

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- 2) The crisis of the Slave Mode of Production was the primary cause of the decline of the Western Roman Empire. Discuss.

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³ Interview in the journal *Historically Speaking*, March/April 2006: 33.

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3) Discuss the historiography of the Decline of Roman Empire. What are the different theories propounded by historians for the fall of Roman Empire?

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4) Fill in the blanks:

- a) wrote the book *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.
- b) The system of governance introduced by Diocletian was known as
- c) was the last pagan ruler of the Roman Empire and made Christianity the religion of the state.
- d) sacked Rome in 410 CE and deposed the last ruler of the Western Roman Empire in 476 CE.
- e) The Eastern Roman Empire is better known as in history.

4.11 SUMMARY

In this Unit we discussed about the Crisis of the Roman Empire. Forming the last segment of Greco-Roman antiquity, this was a period of tremendous change – a carry-over of past problems, the eruption of new issues, adaptations and accommodations, and finally the fissures that coincided with external blows and saw the eclipse of the Roman Empire. Various factors contributed to the crisis. Politically, the far-flung territoriality of the empire made it ungovernable. Civil wars were a recurrent feature; corruption, political and administrative fragmentation, and with the creation of the Eastern Empire, an alternative power base, weakened the Empire, which had hitherto been a united entity. A military despotism introduced to reform the system was a brief reprieve but exacted a heavy price from the citizens. There was an ideological disconnect between the state and army as the citizen-soldiers were replaced by mercenaries and the army could no longer be relied on. At the economic level, falling economy and high levels of inflation created a crisis of subsistence. Farms were abandoned; craft production and long distance trade suffered, and the state's desperate measures of currency debasement and monetary dualism further aggravated the problem. The social fabric of the empire withstood constant change, and simmering tensions either erupted as protests and brigandage or got rearticulated as interim institutions, to cope with the change. As the Germanic tribes infiltrated unchecked and kept pushing into the empire, the crisis of slavery, and all these conjoined crises led to the end of the Western Roman Empire. The Eastern Roman Empire, henceforth known as Byzantium, continued for another millennium and met its end at the hands of the Ottoman Turks in 1453 CE.

4.12 KEYWORDS

<i>Comites</i>	: imperial Roman (court) titles and offices.
Conscription	: compulsory military service for the state.
<i>Curiala/Curiales/Decurions</i>	: Wealthy middle class citizens. <i>Decurions</i> were members of the local assemblies of the town and were drawn from the <i>curiales</i> .
Duce	: later Duke; leader/commander.
<i>Hoplite</i>	: heavily armed foot-soldiers.
<i>Legion</i>	: a unit of Roman army. Its number was not fixed. In the Republic period it consisted of 5000 soldiers divided into three lines of ten maniples (each maniple consisted of 60-120 soldiers). Later around 100 BCE it was divided into 10 <i>cohorts</i> . It also had a cavalry wing (<i>ala</i>). By the 3 rd century CE, it was reduced to a body of 1000-1500 men.
<i>Phalanxes</i>	: a rectangular military formation of the Greeks.
<i>Praetorian Guards</i>	: the Roman Imperial bodyguards.

4.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) See Section 4.3
- 2) See Section 4.4
- 3) See Section 4.5.3

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) See Section 4.6
- 2) See Section 4.7
- 3) See Sub-section 4.7.4

Check Your Progress-3

- 1) See Section 4.8
- 2) See Section 4.8
- 3) See Section 4.10
- 4) a) Edward Gibbon; b) Tetrarchy; c) Theodosius; d) Visigoths; e) Byzantine Empire

4.14 SUGGESTED READINGS

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4.15 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

The Roman Empire – Episode 6: The Fall of the Roman Empire (History Documentary)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDz-z92Qc4Q>

The Rise and Fall of Roman Empire – Documentary Channel

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePq7IeGiIs>

