NO PREP

Ancient Rome

An Overview

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Ancient Rome: An Overview

From a Village to an Empire

Perched on seven hills above the Tiber River in central Italy, Rome began as a modest collection of farming villages sometime around 753 BCE — at least according to Roman legend. The story of Romulus and Remus, twin brothers raised by a she-wolf who went on to found the city, is mythology rather than history, but it tells us something important about how Romans understood themselves: as a people defined by struggle, resourcefulness, and destiny. Archaeological evidence does confirm that settlements existed on the Palatine Hill by the eighth century BCE, and that these villages gradually merged into a unified community during the following centuries. The early Romans were shaped by their neighbors. The Etruscans to the north brought sophisticated urban culture, engineering techniques, and political ideas that the Romans absorbed and adapted. The Greeks, who had colonized southern Italy, contributed art, philosophy, and the alphabet. Rome was never isolated — it sat at the intersection of Mediterranean trade routes and cultural exchange, and its

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The Republic: Senate, Consuls, and Citizen Power

Around 509 BCE, the Romans expelled their last Etruscan king and established the Republic. This was a radical political experiment: instead of a single monarch, power would be shared among elected officials. Two consuls served for one year each, holding executive authority while keeping a check on each other. The Senate (an assembly of aristocrats) advised on legislation, foreign policy, and finances. Below them, assemblies of citizens could vote on laws and elect magistrates. The Republic was not a democracy in the modern sense. Wealthy landowners called patricians dominated political life, while plebeians (common citizens) struggled for centuries to gain equal rights. This class conflict (the Conflict of the Orders) reshaped Roman institutions over two hundred years, eventually giving plebeians access to all major offices. The result was a system of laws and constitutional precedents that Romans

held with fierce pride. When Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon River with his army in 49 BCE, triggering civil war, the Senate saw it as an attack not on a political rival but on the Republic itself.

From Republic to Empire: The Augustan Revolution

Caesar's assassination in 44 BCE did not restore the Republic. It plunged Rome into another round of civil wars. Caesar's adopted son Octavian emerged victorious, defeating Mark Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE. Octavian was shrewd enough to understand that Romans hated kings, so he never called himself one. Instead, he accepted the title 'Augustus' (revered one) and presented himself as the restorer of Republican values even as he concentrated all real power in his own hands. This sleight of hand worked brilliantly. The Augustan Age that followed was a golden era of peace, prosperity, literature (Virgil, Horace, Livy), and architectural splendor. The Empire that Augustus created lasted, in various forms, for centuries. At its height under Trajan around 117 CE, Rome controlled territory from Scotland to Mesopotamia, from Morocco to the Crimea. Perhaps sixty million people lived within its borders, somewhere between a fifth and a quarter of the entire world's population. No other political entity in the ancient world came close to matching Rome's territorial extent or institutional sophistication.

Engineering, Law, and the Roman Legacy

What made Rome endure was not just military force but infrastructure. Roman engineers built roads that still survive, aqueducts that carried water across valleys, concrete structures that have outlasted modern buildings, and a legal system whose principles underpin most of the world's legal codes today. Roman law introduced concepts like the presumption of innocence, the distinction between public and private law, and the idea that law should be written down and publicly accessible. Roman culture spread wherever legions marched. Latin evolved into French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and Romanian. Roman Christianity became the dominant religion of Europe. Roman architecture set the template for government buildings across the world — the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C. is a Roman building wearing neoclassical clothes. When we speak of 'civilization' in the Western tradition, we are often speaking of Rome wearing a new costume.

Why Rome's Archaeological Record Is Enormous

Rome is one of the most archaeologically rich civilizations in history for a simple reason: the empire was huge and it lasted a long time. From the British frontier to the Syrian desert, Roman engineers built in durable materials — stone, brick, and that remarkable concrete — and marked their presence with inscriptions, coins, pottery, and official documents. Pompeii and Herculaneum preserved an entire snapshot of urban life in 79 CE. Hadrian's Wall still stands in northern England. Roman aqueducts in France, Spain, and North Africa still draw tourists. Every major European city sits atop Roman foundations, which means construction projects constantly turn up new finds. Rome is not the distant past — it is literally under our feet.

Key Information: Ancient Rome

Detail	Information
Traditional Founding Date	753 BCE (legendary); settlements confirmed c. 800s BCE
Republic Established	509 BCE, after expulsion of Etruscan kings
First Emperor	Augustus (Octavian), ruled 27 BCE – 14 CE
Peak Territorial Extent	Under Emperor Trajan, c. 117 CE
Estimated Peak Population	~60 million people within the empire
Official Language	Latin (Greek in the eastern provinces)
Key Legacy	Roman law, Latin languages, Christianity, architecture
Western Empire's End	476 CE, deposition of last emperor Romulus Augustulus

Case Study: Marco's Impossible Morning

Marco Ricci is a city planner in modern Rome. Every morning, he brews his espresso and opens emails about the city's chronic infrastructure problem — not crumbling pipes or aging bridges, but ancient ruins. Rome has been continuously inhabited for nearly 3,000 years, and its geological layers are packed with history. Somewhere beneath every apartment block, every subway station, every parking garage is a Roman floor, a medieval well, or a Renaissance drain. This morning's email is from the contractor building the new metro line extension. Workers drilling under the Piazza Venezia hit a large stone foundation at four meters depth. Work has stopped. The archaeologists are on site. The contractor wants to know how long the delay will be. Marco has seen this before — the last metro extension took fifteen years longer than planned because of what they found underground. He pulls up the city's archaeological map, a tangled web of known and suspected Roman-era structures. The foundation his workers hit falls squarely in a zone marked 'high probability — monumental.' It could be nothing. It could be a lost temple that historians have been hunting for decades. Marco understands both sides. Rome needs modern transit. Rome also is Rome. He picks up the phone, knowing that whatever he decides, someone is going to be furious.

1. What specific conflict does Marco face, and how does it reflect a tension that modern cities built on ancient sites deal with every day?

2. Based on the reading, why is Rome especially likely to have archaeological discoveries beneath its streets compared to most other cities?

Multiple Choice

1. What title did Octavian take that allowed him to hold power without being called a king?

    a) Imperator

    b) Caesar

    c) Consul

    d) Augustus

2. Which group made up the Roman Senate during the Republic?

    a) Elected plebeians

    b) Military generals only

    c) Wealthy patrician landowners

    d) Provincial governors who administered distant territories

3. What does the reading identify as one of Rome's most important skills that explains its success?

    a) Borrowing, adapting, and improving upon ideas from other cultures

    b) Isolating itself from foreign influence

    c) Relying entirely on military conquest

    d) Maintaining a single hereditary king with unlimited power and control

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Patricians	A) Common Roman citizens who gradually gained political rights over centuries
2. ___ Plebeians	B) Language of Rome that evolved into Spanish, French, Italian, and other modern languages
3. ___ Republic	C) Title meaning 'revered one' given to Octavian as first emperor
4. ___ Augustus	D) Wealthy landowners who dominated Roman politics in the early Republic
5. ___ Latin	E) Roman government system with elected officials instead of a king

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Rome traditionally claims to have been founded in 753 BCE by the legendary brothers _____ and Remus.

2. The two highest elected officials who ran the Roman Republic for one year each were called _____.

3. At its height under Emperor Trajan, the Roman Empire contained an estimated _____ million people.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Explain why Augustus never called himself king, and what this tells us about Roman political culture.

2. The reading argues that Roman civilization is 'literally under our feet.' What evidence does it give, and do you find this convincing?

3. How did the Conflict of the Orders reshape Roman society, and what does it reveal about how political change happens?