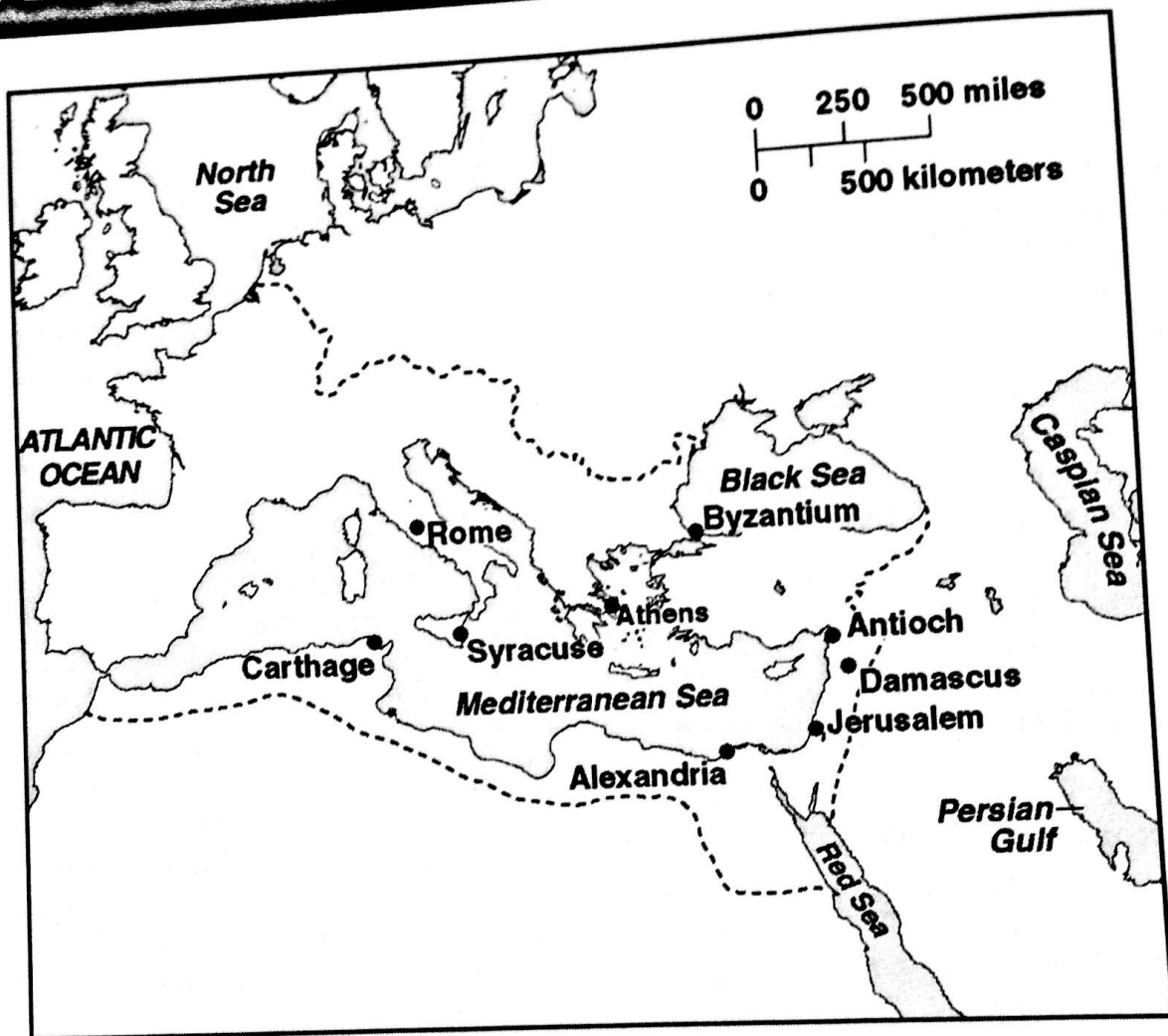


Roman Law



The dotted line marks the boundary of the Roman Empire in A.D. 14.

A Brief History of Ancient Rome

Rome is located on the Tiber River, halfway down the Italian Peninsula. It was settled by Latin-speaking peoples. For hundreds of years, the city-state was ruled by kings, advised by a council of nobles called the Senate.

In 509 B.C., the citizens of Rome overthrew the last king and set up a republic. They replaced the king with two consuls. The consuls had to work together, because each consul could veto the decisions of the other. The Senate took on more power and ruled Rome alongside the two consuls.

The consuls held office for only a year while the senators served for life. After serving their terms in office, the consuls became members of the Senate. A citizen assembly elected the consuls each year and voted yes or no on laws proposed by the Senate and consuls.

Only patricians, land-owning nobles, voted for the consuls and served in the Senate. But the patricians were only a small part of the population. The common people, the plebeians, were left out of the republican government. Many struggles took place between the two classes, and gradually the plebeians gained more power in the republic.

Warfare with neighboring states was common, and the city-state expanded. By 264 B.C., Rome

controlled all of the Italian Peninsula. It next challenged Carthage, a city-state in North Africa, which ruled an empire throughout the western Mediterranean area. Rome and Carthage fought three wars, known as the Punic Wars. (Romans called Carthaginians *Punici*.) Rome finally defeated and burned Carthage in 146 B.C. One hundred years later, Rome controlled all the lands surrounding the Mediterranean.

The victories brought power, wealth, and slaves to Rome. They also brought an end to the republic as factions began to fight for power. Roman General Julius Caesar seized power and was named dictator for life. But he was murdered. Caesar's death plunged Rome into more than a decade of civil war. The warfare finally ended in 31 B.C. when Octavian (later known as Augustus), Caesar's adopted son, became the sole ruler of the Roman Empire.

For 200 years, the empire was free of major civil wars or invasions. This long period of peace is known as the *Pax Romana* (Roman peace). Romans built roads, aqueducts, and new cities. Trade flourished, and the empire kept expanding. At its height, it included most of Western Europe, North Africa, Asia Minor, and the Middle East.

Following this period, Rome went into a century of decline. A series of incompetent emperors took power. The army intervened in the government. The economy collapsed. And outside pressure increased on the empire, especially from Persians in the east and German tribes in the north.

Finally, in A.D. 284, Emperor Diocletian took power. He moved boldly to address the empire's problems. He set price controls and doubled the size of the army. To govern the empire more easily, he divided it into two parts: the Greek-speaking east and the Latin-speaking west. He also began persecuting members of the Christian faith, a religion that had grown steadily as Rome began its decline.

Diocletian's reforms stabilized the empire. But they did not stop the spread of Christianity. Twenty years after he left office, a new emperor

embraced the religion. By A.D. 400, it was the official religion of the empire.

Within several decades, however, the western part of the empire had fallen. German tribes sacked Rome in 410 and again in 453 and 455. They toppled the last emperor in 476. The eastern part of the empire, known as the Byzantine Empire, lasted another thousand years.

The Roman Republic and Empire lasted almost 1,000 years. During this period, the Romans contributed much to civilization. They were great builders, architects, and engineers. They built roads, bridges, buildings, sewers, and aqueducts. The Roman language, Latin, produced modern languages such as Spanish, Italian, French, and Portuguese.

But perhaps the greatest contribution of the Romans was their law. They created the most sophisticated system of law in the ancient world. It remains highly influential in modern times.

For Discussion

1. What potential intergroup conflicts were there within the Roman Empire?
2. The United States divides the powers of the federal government among Congress, the president, and the judiciary. How were powers separated in the Roman Republic? Why do you think the powers were separated?
3. Do you think it might have been possible for the republic to continue running the empire? Explain.
4. Why do you think law would be important to Romans?

ACTIVITY

Timeline

From this reading and your history textbook, create a timeline showing at least 10 major events in Roman history.