



Heritage > The Romans

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## The Romans

### The Origins of Rome

In AD 114 you could travel from Scotland to the Sahara desert and still be within the Roman empire. Given the technology of the time and the fact that nearly two thousand years later we are still trying to unite Europe into one government it is perhaps true to say that the Roman Empire has been one of man's greatest achievements so far. The Romans took their empire and gave it one government, a common language and one currency - something which the politicians of today can probably only dream of accomplishing.

We still use the Roman alphabet, Roman numerals and the Roman months. The Romans developed concrete, glass windows, the dome, central heating, blocks of flats, public health, public baths, hospitals, a postal service, a fire brigade, a civil service and international trade. Roman roads, aqueducts and buildings still survive and Latin - the language of the Romans - formed the basis of most of the European languages including Italian, French, Spanish and English. Latin is even taught in many schools even though it has been a "dead" language for many centuries.

But where did it all start? Well there are perhaps two answers to this question as any historian can tell you. We can look at the facts and try and work out what the evidence shows us. Indeed the archaeological evidence suggests that Rome began in about 1600 BC as a collection of small round wooden huts built on a group of seven hills near the river Tiber on the borders of Etruria in central Italy. There is however another version of the creation of Rome and one which the Romans themselves convinced themselves was true.



In the first century BC the roman poet Virgil wrote a poem entitled "Aenid", in it he claimed that the romans were the descendants of a great warrior - a trojan prince called Aenas. Another legend of the first century B.C told by the historian Livy described how Rome was built by the soldier farmer Romulus in 753 BC. Romulus and his twin brother Remus were said to have been raised by a she-wolf and were the sons of the war-god Mars. The legend tells that when the brothers grew into men they settled in the spot where they had been found by the she-wolf. They quarrelled violently however and Remus was killed by Romulus. The settlement they had created became known as Rome after Romulus.

Either of the two legends above certainly gave the Romans a much more romantic history than the archaeological evidence suggests.

Early Rome was a kingdom until 509 BC when the nobles drove out the evil Etruscan King, Tarquin the Proud. Tarquin returned however and had it not been for Horatius on the bridge Rome would have fallen. The only access to Rome was via a small bridge and while engineers worked to collapse the supports of the bridge three soldiers defended it from the advancing Tarquin. Two of the soldiers fled but the third Horatius Cocles fought on the bridge until it collapsed.

Rome became a republic and was ruled by two consuls elected from the senate (the parliament of the Roman Empire) each year. Other government officials were also elected and when their period of office was over they became life members of the senate. The Senate ran the government of Rome and it advised the consuls. Political problems were discussed in the senate and citizens could vote to accept or reject new laws in their assemblies.



A young Roman from a rich family could expect to serve in the army until his late twenties when he would stand for election as a quaestor. If elected, he gained entry to the senate and would help run the treasury. In his thirties he would stand for election again but this time for the position of praetor (judge and general) and in his forties he might hope to stand for election as one of the two consuls. He would certainly hope to be elected as one of the provincial governors.

Many of the leading families were known as patricians and everybody who was not a patrician was a plebeians. Some plebeians such as bankers and merchants were very rich and others were simple farmers but because they were all Roman citizens they were entitled to a vote in elections. Women however had no such rights and were not considered citizens. They were dependant on their fathers and husbands and were not allowed a vote. In some respects they were no better off than slaves, who were dependant on their masters and also had no vote.



With time the city became more powerful - its expansion was marked not by a series of victories but by a series of defeats. After each setback however the Romans returned with even more determination and slowly they overcame their enemies. By the fourth and third centuries BC they had conquered most of Italy and by 280 BC the Romans were a major power in the Mediterranean. This led them into conflict with the Greeks who at that time had settled in southern Italy. A Greek general called Pyrrhus defeated the Romans in 279 BC and upon his victory he is said to have commented "One more victory like this and I will be destroyed." Soon after the victory he withdrew his army - a costly success is still called a "Pyrrhic victory".

Contact with the Greeks, who were more cultured and educated than the Romans, had a profound effect on the Romans. Rich Romans bought Greek slaves to be their accountants and scribes while most of the teachers and Doctors were Greek. Roman literature, architecture and religion were all influenced to some degree by the Greek culture and there were even some amongst the Romans who felt that the Romans were losing their identity as they were "swept along on the puffs of the clever brains of the Greeks".



By 260 BC city of Rome was a major force and a clash with the trading empire of Carthage led to 120 years of terrible wars.

The Romans faced their hardest test in 218 BC when they blocked the route into Northern Italy and the Carthaginian General Hannibal took an army of 30,000 men and 40 elephants from Spain to Italy by marching over the Alps. Hannibal's army was huge and he even brought War Elephants with him in an attempt to crush the Romans forever. Hannibal smashed all the Roman legions which were sent after him but Rome refused to give in and kept sending army after army against him. He fought on in Italy for fifteen years and in that time the Romans had attacked him and his bases in Spain and Africa with countless armies but still they could not defeat him. Eventually in 203 BC the Carthaginians withdrew in an attempt to defend Carthage against the Roman General Scipio who three years earlier had taken Spain. In 202 BC Hannibal was defeated by Scipio at the battle of Zama and eventually in 146 BC the Romans completely destroyed Carthage. The Romans even ploughed salt into the fields around Carthage so that nothing could ever grow there again.

With the conquest of Carthage came new lands and territories stretched over Spain and Northern Africa. Wars with other powerful states to the East soon followed and generals who won these conflicts brought vast wealth to Rome, but they also used their armies to fight for personal power in Italy. Civil Wars raged across the Roman Empire.

During the second century BC Rome also overcame Greece and Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Some of the countries in Europe were "allies", as long as they paid their taxes to Rome they were allowed to keep their own rulers. Conquered countries however became provinces of Rome and were ruled by Roman Governors.