

Rome--A Vast & Powerful Empire

Rome was at the peak of its power from the beginning of Augustus' rule in 27 B.C.E. to 180 C.E. For 207 years, peace reigned throughout the empire, except for some fighting with tribes along the borders. This period of peace and prosperity is known as the *Pax Romana*—Roman peace. During this time, the Roman Empire included more than 3 million square miles. Its population numbered between 60 and 80 million people. About one million people lived in the city of Rome itself.

An Economy Based on Trade and Agriculture:

Agriculture was the most important industry in the empire. All else depended on it. About 90 percent of the people were engaged in farming. Most Romans survived on the produce from their local area. Additional foodstuffs when needed and luxury items for the rich were obtained through trade. In Augustus' time, a silver coin called a *denarius*¹ was in use throughout the empire. Having common coinage made trade between different parts of the empire much easier.

Rome had a vast trading network. Ships from the east traveled the Mediterranean protected by the Roman navy. Cities such as Corinth in Greece and Antioch and Ephesus in Anatolia grew wealthy. Rome also traded with China and India.

A complex network of roads linked the empire to such far-flung places as Parthia (later Persia) and southern Russia. These roads were originally built by the Roman army for military purposes. The most important of the roads were the Silk Roads, named for the overland routes on which silk from China came through Asia to the Romans. Other luxury goods traveled along the same routes. Trade also brought Roman ways to the provinces and beyond.

Managing a Huge Empire:

The borders of the Roman Empire measured some 10,000 miles. By the second century C.E., the empire reached from Spain to Mesopotamia, from North Africa to Britain. Included in its provinces were people of many languages, cultures, and customs.

The Roman army drew upon the men of the provinces as **auxiliary**, or support, forces. They were not citizens of Rome. But they learned Roman customs and became citizens when they were discharged from military service. In this way, the army also spread the Roman way of life to the provinces and Roman rights to non-Romans.

A Sound Government:

Augustus was Rome's ablest emperor. He stabilized the frontier, glorified Rome with splendid public buildings, and created a system of government that survived for centuries. He set up a civil service. That is, he paid workers to manage the affairs of government, such as the grain supply, tax collection, and the postal system. Although the senate still functioned, civil servants drawn from plebeians and even former slaves actually administered the empire.

¹ A small silver Roman coin—it was the amount of one day's wages for a common day laborer.

After Augustus died in 14 C.E., the Senate chose his adopted son Tiberius as his successor. During the *Pax Romana*, some of Rome's emperors were able and intelligent. Some were cruel. Two, Caligula and Nero, were either insane or unstable. Yet the system of government set up by Augustus proved to be stable. This was due mainly to the effectiveness of the civil service in carrying out day-to-day operations.

The Emperors and Succession:

Rome's peace and prosperity depended upon the orderly transfer of power. Because Rome had no written law for selecting a new emperor, a crisis or a civil war was always a possibility when an emperor died. The succession problem was temporarily solved by the leaders known as the Five Good Emperors. Beginning with Nerva in 96 C.E., each of them adopted as his heir a respected leader who had the support of both the army and the people to be the next emperor. The reign of Marcus Aurelius, the last of the five, ended in 180 C.E. His death marked the beginning of the empire's decline and the end of the *Pax Romana*.

“Bread and Circuses”—Food and Entertainment:



By the time of the empire, wealth and social status had made huge differences in how people lived. Classes had little in common. The rich lived extravagantly. They spent large sums of money on homes, gardens, slaves, and luxuries. They gave banquets that lasted for many hours and included foods that were rare and costly, such as boiled ostrich and parrot-tongue pie.

However, most people in Rome barely had the necessities of life. During the time of the empire, much of the city's population was unemployed. The government supported these people with daily rations of grain. In the shadow of Rome's great temples and public buildings, poor people crowded into rickety, sprawling tenements. Fire was a constant danger.

To distract and control the masses of Romans, the government provided free games, races, mock battles, and gladiator contests. By 250 C.E., there were 150 holidays a year. On these days of celebration, the Colosseum, a huge arena that could hold 50,000, would fill with the rich and the poor alike. The spectacles they watched combined bravery and cruelty, honor and violence. In the animal shows, wild creatures brought from distant lands, such as tigers, lions, and bears, fought to the death. In other contests, gladiators engaged in combat with animals or with each other, often until one of them was killed.



The *Pax Romana* had brought 200 years of peace and prosperity to Rome. During this time, a new religion called Christianity developed and began to spread throughout the empire.

SOURCE: *World History: Patterns of Interaction*. McDougal-Littell: 1999, pp. 148-150.