

E. The Early Roman Empire

1. The Question of Succession and the Reign of Tiberius

- a) Since he had no son, Augustus had to choose from among other possible candidates.
- b) His greatest generals died during his lifetime, so he had to choose someone from his extended family. He chose one of his two step-sons named Tiberius.
- c) Augustus chose Tiberius as his “co-princeps” for two years, and then designated him as his desired successor in his will.
- d) Tiberius was worried about his brother’s son, who became a highly successful general by conquering parts of Germany, and who thus became known as “Germanicus.”
- e) It is the tension between Tiberius and Germanicus that acts as the secondary theme to the greatness of Thusnelda in the painting *Thusnelda and the Triumph of Germanicus* by Karl von Piloty.



Thusnelda and the Triumph of Germanicus, by Karl von Piloty

- f) After being granted a triumph, Germanicus was sent to the east, where he died mysteriously.
- g) The Romans mourned his passing as a national tragedy, and suspicions naturally fell upon Tiberius.
- h) Tiberius hated being emperor so much that he gave it up! He retired to an island home and left one of his generals, Sejanus, in charge. The departure of

the emperor and his family from Rome for their island retreat is captured in Felix Barras's painting of *Tiberius in Exile*, as the forlorn group crowds into a small boat to escape the corruption of Rome. [An alternate view, by the way, is that this painting is of people exiled *by* Tiberius. My research on this is not conclusive.]



The Exiles of Tiberius, by Felix Joseph Barras

- i) A conspiracy against him planned by Germanicus's son Caligula resulted in Tiberius's assassination.
- j) After Tiberius was killed, Caligula became the third emperor. He was known for participating in the gladiatorial games himself, and for throwing members of the audience into the arena! He was killed by his own bodyguards.
- k) The fourth emperor, Claudius, knew what it was to be emperor. He was terrified of it, as is so powerfully illustrated in the paintings of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, such as *An Emperor, c.41 AD*, which shows him hiding so that he won't be found and made emperor!



An Emperor c.41 AD, by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema

- l) Despite the intrigues and conspiracies of imperium, Claudius did achieve some positive outcomes. He is known for commissioning the construction of the “Aqua Claudia,” the Claudian aqueduct, which bought more running water to Rome.

F. The Climax of the Roman Empire

1. The usual mode of succession in the empire was replacement by assassination.
2. Rome had reverted to the archaic plateau, and thus is of little interest to us as an ancient culture anymore.
3. This did not prevent the Romans from creating a vast empire, however. The empire continued to be expanded regularly by emperors who conquered Rome’s weaker neighbors.
4. By 117 AD, the Roman empire had reached its maximum extent, reaching across from Portugal to Mesopotamia, and south from Egypt up into Britain in the north. The following maps provide two views of the empire’s size. The latter is a useful overlay of the empire compared to the present-day continental United States.

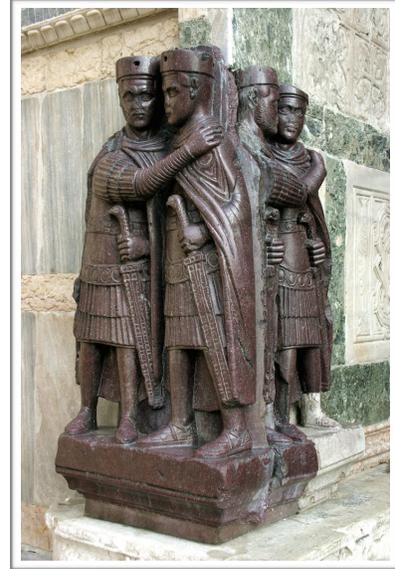


Map of the Roman Empire at its greatest extent (c. 117 AD) — and shown compared to the present-day United States.

G. The Decline of the Roman Empire

1. In order to exist at all, empires must grow. This imperative stems from the mode of life of the rulers and inhabitants of an empire. The rulers grow accustomed to feeding off *of others*, from plundering the wealth *of others*. There needs to be an “other” culture to take advantage of for an imperial culture to exist. It is a completely self-less form of existence. When there is no other, the *self* cannot sustain itself and dies.

2. After 117 AD, when Rome could grow no more, it naturally began to shrink. All of the surrounding cultures could feel the release of this pressure, and the vacuum created and they began to push in on the Romans.
3. Feeling the strain of managing the empire, c.293 AD, the emperor Diocletian divided the empire into *four* - a system of rule known as the *tetrarchy*! (We've seen it all, haven't we! Monarchs at first. Kinds of duarchy/diarchy in Sparta and early Rome (the consulship), triarchies too (the first and second "triumvirates") and now a "tetrarchy"! I know what you are wondering...was there ever a pentarchy!?)
4. The presence of four co-rulers discouraged assassination, since it was harder to seize power when it was so decentralized.
5. It also facilitated the defense of the empire, by placing the rulers directly in charge of those areas that need their attention.
6. A crucial problem, however, was that it was very expensive to have four emperors. They all had courts, with all the trappings. And so taxes rose, making life harder on the people in the empire.



A famous sculptural depiction of the *Tetrarchy* - a mutually supporting system of four emperors ruling at the same time in different parts of the empire devised by Diocletian c.293 AD.

K. The Triumph of Christianity

1. Accession of Constantine
 - a) The tetrarchy was supposed to work by having emperors abdicate and chose successors within the overall arrangement of having four rulers.
 - b) However, a new emperor named Constantine, refused to accept the scheme.
 - c) The result was an extended civil war for control of the empire that lasted eighteen years altogether, which Constantine won, becoming at the same time the first *Christian* emperor, since he had converted to this belief that was becoming increasingly popular throughout the empire.



A painting in the Vatican in Rome depicts Constantine during the Roman civil war having a vision of the Christian cross.

2. Constantine was the first Christian Roman emperor, but not the last. The line of Christian emperors was almost uninterrupted thereafter.
3. The final triumph of Christianity within Rome was achieved under emperor Theodosius (r.380-395) who made Christianity the only legal religion within the empire.
4. The power of Christianity over even the emperor was demonstrated when Theodosius ordered the slaughter of the citizens of a rebellious district. Theodosius was then forbidden to enter a Christian church by a bishop (a church leader) named Ambrose. Ambrose forced Theodosius to repent in public for his violent orders before he could be allowed to enter a Christian church to pray.



One artist captures the conversion of Theodosius. Another shows us the power of the Christian church over him, as he stopped in his tracks by Bishop Ambrose, as a tribune might once have stopped a consul.

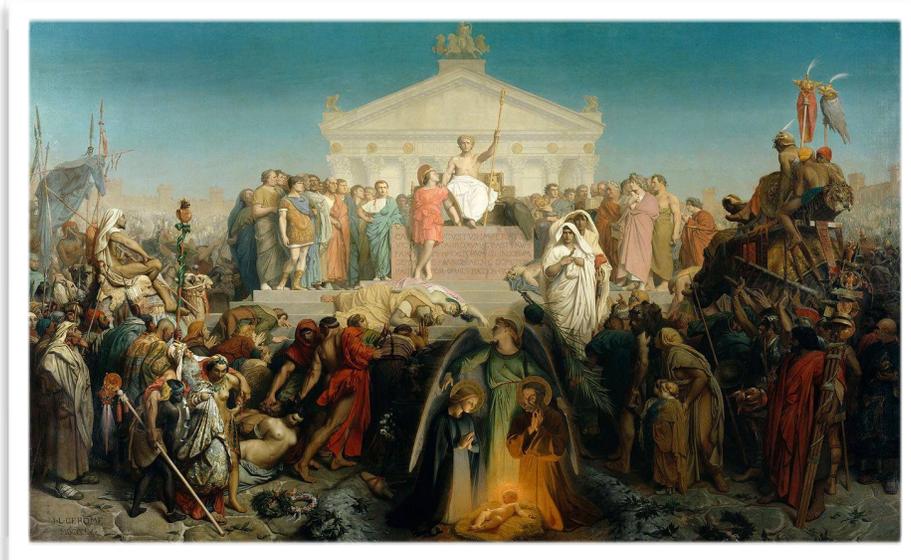
L. The Barbarian Invasions

1. In 376, the Germanic barbarians known as Visigoths (western Goths), appeared at the Danube, Rome's northern border, begging to be allowed into the empire.
2. The Goths were being driven into Roman territory by a terrifying conquering horde that had crossed from Asia into Europe: the Huns!
3. The Goths entered the empire, and defeated the Romans at the pivotal Battle of Adrianople in 378 AD.
4. Theodosius was able to stop them temporarily, but in 410 AD, the Visigoths, led by a chieftain named Alaric, sacked the city of Rome itself, stealing much of its wealth, and enslaving many of its citizens. (Remember, Rome had not been sacked since 390 BC! 800 years had passed.)

5. Other barbarians followed in the footsteps of the Visigoths. In 455, the city of Rome was again sacked, this time by a tribe known as the Vandals, who had made their new home at Carthage.

M. The Fall of the Roman Empire

1. By 476, the date usually assigned as the year of the Fall of the Roman Empire, all of Rome's imperial provinces had been seized by invading barbarians, Italy itself had been ravaged by multiple invaders, and Rome twice sacked. All that remained was for someone to officially announce that the Roman Empire was truly finished.
2. Leading up to 476, barbarian rulers of Italy had satisfied themselves to support puppet emperors in Rome. In 476, however, the Germanic barbarian Odovacar decided to depose then emperor Romulus Augustus, who became the last man to hold the title of Roman Emperor in the city of Rome.
3. It is one of the strange twists of fate that Romulus Augustus bore both the name of Rome's first legendary king and that of its first emperor. Because of his youth, he was known as Romulus "Augustulus" ("little Augustus").
4. The Eastern half of the Roman Empire remained intact until 1453, and is usually referred to as the Byzantine Empire. It was, however, much less important.
5. After 476, the European world suffered a "Dark Age." The quality of life for Europeans was much lower than what the Romans had achieved (especially at the height of the empire), there were almost constant wars, and Greco-Roman ideas about government and philosophy were almost completely lost.
6. In the place of Rome different Christian kingdoms were created, which gradual rose up out of this Dark Age to form the world we know as modern Europe. But that is a story for next year!



The *Age of Augustus*, by Jean-Léon Gérôme symbolizes both the seeming grandeur of Rome, and the religion that would conquer and replace it.