

Early Civilization in Italy

West of modern-day Greece lies a boot-shaped peninsula which extends 500 miles out into the Mediterranean Sea. Today this nation-state is known as Italy or *Italia* to those who live there.

In the ancient world, a civilization and culture developed there which was destined to become the strongest, most powerful, and most extensive empire in the history of the world. It was known as the Roman Empire.

The Roman Empire ruled for centuries over the entire Mediterranean region. The lands it controlled stretched from the northern coast of Africa to modern-day Germany; from the Caspian Sea in the east to the British Isles in the northern Atlantic Ocean.

The legacy of the Roman Empire is an involved one. The Roman government with its many emperors, both good and bad, had its problems. However, in

the days of the Roman Empire, peace and prosperity existed throughout its lands. Founded over a century before the birth of Christ, the Roman Empire did not collapse completely until the 400s A.D.

So much chaos and destruction followed the fall of the Roman Empire that, for nearly 1000 years, the people of western Europe looked back on the days of Rome as a time of peace and happiness.

The power that was Rome marked something new in the history of Western civilization. It was the first time the entire civilized West was under the control of a single government. Many of the political systems, traditions, and laws of the Romans continue into our own time.

But before there was a Roman Empire, there was a Roman Republic. And before there was a Roman Republic, there was only the city of Rome. Before

that, Rome existed as a small village in ancient Italy. What allowed Rome to become such a powerful place in Western civilization? How did Rome come to dominate the Mediterranean world?

Before we can answer that important question, we must first look at Italy before there was a Rome. Prior to 1000 B.C., Italy was home to few people. It was a backward place, inhabited by uncivilized tribes. In other parts of the ancient world, the great kingdoms of Egypt, Babylonia, and even the island of Crete were the centers of civilization.

After 1000 B.C., Italy was invaded by tribes

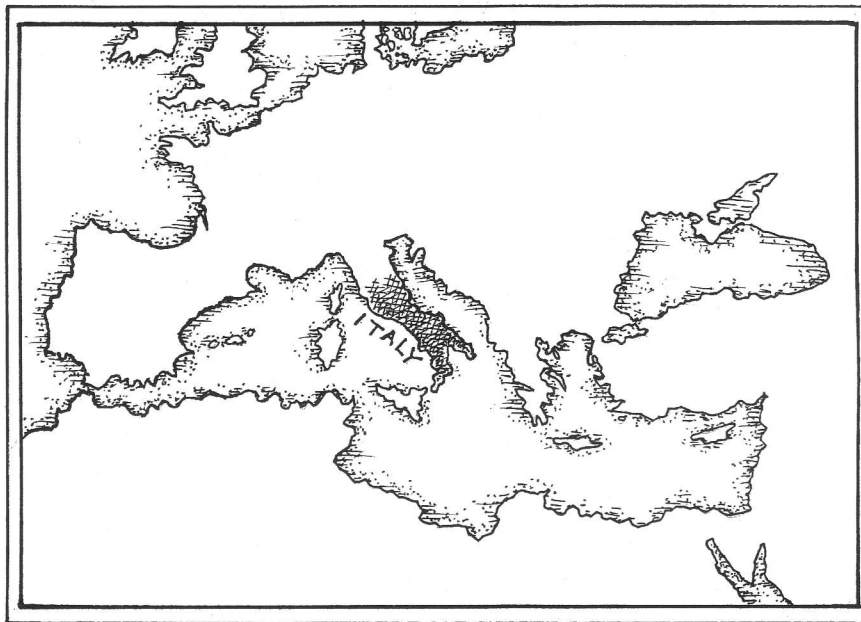
from the outside which carried iron weapons. These invaders easily took control of the small villages dotting the Italian landscape. There was no civilization there for these intruders to destroy, however.

In fact, these invaders were more advanced than the people they overwhelmed. It was through these

invasions that civilization came to Italy. Many of the invaders called themselves the Rasena. The Greeks called them the Tyrrhenoi. (Today, the waters off the southwestern coast of Italy are known as the Tyrrhenian (tih REE nee an) Sea .

Archaeologists today refer to these new inhabitants of Italy as the Etruscans (ee TRUS kanz). The lands they occupied were called Etruria (ee TROOR ee uh) and extended along the west coast of Italy between the Tiber and Arno Rivers. This region is known as Tuscany, a name derived from the word "Etruscans."

From these beginnings, civilization in a primitive form took root in Italy. What eventually developed was a power rivalry which allowed the people of a tiny village called Rome to rise to dominance. Their story is a fascinating one.



The Origins of Rome

History tells us little about the Etruscans, the first civilized people to enter Italy around 1000 B.C. Their language remains undeciphered, which makes it difficult to know much about them. Once they settled in Italy, they created a confederacy, or loose union, of cities between 700 and 500 B.C.

During this period of Etruscan influence in central Italy, other Mediterranean people were making their way to Italian shores. The Phoenicians lived along the eastern Mediterranean. They began colonizing extensively after 1000 B.C. far to the west. In 814 B.C., according to tradition, the Phoenicians established a trading city in northern Africa in the modern-day country of Tunisia. The city was called Carthage. (Today it is known as Tunis.)

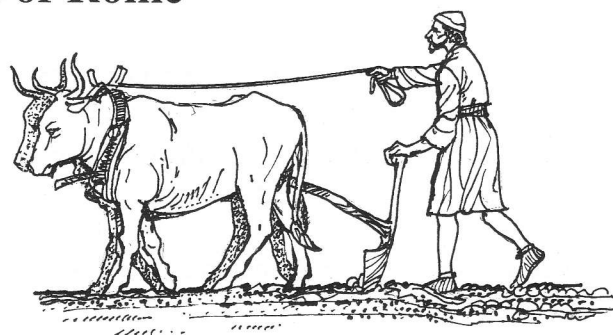
Carthage became one of the most important Phoenician cities in the Mediterranean. Its location put the Phoenicians within 250 miles of the toe of the Italian Peninsula and only 90 miles from the island of Sicily, just off the coast of Italy.

By the 700s B.C., the Greeks were busy establishing colonies in southern Italy. They created important city-states in that region which became great trading centers. Also during the 8th century, the Greeks and the Carthaginians began colonizing Sicily, each at opposite ends of the large, triangular island.

These three powers—the Etruscans, the Carthaginians, and the Greeks—controlled much of the trade on the Italian Peninsula by the middle of the 700s. During this period, a region south of Etruria known as Latium was home to approximately 30 villages whose inhabitants spoke the same language—Latin. One of these villages was known as Rome. Latium was organized into a defensive alliance known as the Latin League. At this time, Rome was not an important town even in the Latin League.

The origins of Rome are shrouded in myth. Legend has it that the village was founded by orphaned twins, Romulus and Remus, (who were raised by a she-wolf) in the year 753 B.C. However, archeology indicates that the site of Rome was occupied for centuries prior to that date.

By 600 B.C., Rome had developed along the Greek city-state model and was ruled by a chieftain



or king known as a *rex*. The king governed with the help of a council called a senate, which included members from the leading citizens of Rome. The word senate comes from the Latin word *senex* meaning “old man.”

By the 600s B.C., the Etruscans were dominating the Latin League, including Rome. Rome was greatly influenced by the Etruscans. Deities later identified as Roman gods and goddesses were originally Etruscan. The Romans developed their written language from the Greek, which the Etruscans introduced to them. The Roman monarchy was patterned after the Etruscan government. In particular, the Etruscan military, based on the Greek model of farmer-citizens (known as hoplites) who fought using the phalanx formation, was adopted by the Romans.

Roman society was also based on the Etruscan model. The Romans recognized two classes of citizens: the patricians, or the upper class, and the plebeians, which consisted of the small landowners and tenant farmers (those who worked someone else’s land). These classes remained important in Roman society for hundreds of years to follow.

After approximately a century of Etruscan control of Rome, a group of patricians drove out the last Etruscan ruler and proclaimed Rome an independent republic. The year was 509 B.C. This marked the beginning of a new era for Rome.

Review and Write

The Etruscans influenced the Romans in many ways. Why do you think Etruscan influence over Rome in the 6th century B.C. is considered so important?

The Roman Republic

For two centuries following the establishment of the Republic, the Romans found themselves almost constantly at war. With the removal of the Etruscan king, other rival city-states, former allies of Rome in the Latin League, tried to take advantage of Rome by invading her territory, putting Rome on the defensive.

In time, Roman forces conquered their neighbors and came to dominate the cities of the Latin League. They did not destroy these cities or even annex them as Roman territory. They made treaties with the conquered towns, permitting them to operate independently in local matters. However, in time of war, Rome expected the Latium cities to provide troops for the Roman army.

With nearly endless sources of troops, Rome continued its conquests throughout Italy. By 400 B.C., Rome prepared to strike against its Etruscan neighbors to the north. However, they were almost too late.

By this time Etruscan power was already in decline. Etruscans had been facing another enemy

from the north, the Celts, who had pushed their way into northern Italy as early as 500 B.C. (The Celts had already become dominant in western Europe in modern-day Germany, France, and the British Isles.)

One group of Celts, the Gauls, crossed the Alps into Italy after 500 B.C. and pushed the Etruscans out of the Po River valley in northern Italy. Each passing year brought the Gauls farther south into Etruria. It was during this period of declining Etruscan power that the Romans expanded throughout central Italy.

After 400 B.C., the Romans found themselves faced with a new enemy—the Gauls. On July 16, 390 B.C., a Gallic army defeated the Romans along the banks of the Allia River, just 10 miles north of Rome. (For centuries to follow, the Romans considered July 16 an unlucky day.)

With little opposition, the Gauls marched into Rome and occupied it. The city was looted, burned, and many senators were executed. After occupying much of the city for less than a year, the Gauls were convinced to leave after the Romans paid them 1000 pounds of gold. (Legend says that the Gauls used rigged scales and actually were paid more than 1000 pounds.) Eight centuries passed before Rome was again occupied by a foreign army.

For the remainder of the 300s B.C., Rome's most dangerous enemies were other Italic people living in central Italy. Chief among them were the Samnites, who lived in Campania, a fertile plain region south of Latium. In 343 B.C., Rome fought the Samnites in a series of wars, and the Romans won. For the first time, the Romans had no powerful enemy in Italy.

By 290 B.C., the Romans controlled all of Italy from the Celtic settlements in the Po Valley to the Greek trading colonies in the south. And after 265, these Greek city-states accepted Roman control.



Research and Write

The Romans were able to dominate all of Italy because they had a skilled and well-disciplined army. Research the Roman army. Why were Roman soldiers so effective? How were they organized?

Early Italy, c. 275 B.C.



Map Exercise

Identify each of the following on the above map: Rome, Latium, Samnia, Campania, Cisalpine, Gaul, Tarentum, Sicily, Syracuse, the Alps, the Po River, the Tiber River, Etruria, Adriatic Sea, Tyrrhenian Sea, Corsica, and Sardinia.

Government in Rome

During the centuries of Rome's expansion throughout the Italian Peninsula, Rome experienced political change as well. With the overthrow of the last of the Etruscan kings, the Romans replaced their monarchy with elected officials called *consuls*.

Two consuls were elected by a vote of the citizens of the city. These officials ruled at the same time for a year's term. Generally, the consul candidates were taken from the membership of the Senate, so they came from the ranks of the Roman upper class.



Each consul had full power as a chief executive and held judicial power, too. The scope of their power was limited technically only by the right of each to veto the action taken by the other.

Although previously in Rome, power was held in the hands of the aristocratic landowners called patricians; the lower class, or plebeians, began to campaign for more political power.

For good reasons, the plebeians were tired of the patrician-controlled system. For one, the plebeians were forced to serve in the Roman army when needed for active duty, but they did not have the right to hold public office.

Also, in judicial trials and cases, the plebeians often felt discriminated against. Many plebeians did not even know exactly what their individual legal rights and privileges were, since the laws of Rome were not written down. Instead, the patricians retained the privilege of knowing the law and being able to interpret it as they saw fit.

In the 400s B.C., plebeian frustration led to a rebellion which forced the patricians to grant the plebeians political representation. They gained the right to elect a number of representatives called tribunes. Such men had the power to protect the plebeians by vetoing any unlawful or unfair acts passed by the patricians.

Following this plebeian victory, Roman law was codified, or written down in an organized form, for the first time. This written law of Rome was called the Twelve Tables because it was written on 12 wooden tablets. From this period, all Romans understood what the law was and what it said.

In 367 B.C., the plebeians were able to elect their first consul. This broke the patrician monopoly on membership in the Roman Senate since consuls, traditionally, were members of the Senate.

Within a single century, Rome experienced political change which gave new power to the plebeians. However, many of these reforms were not extensive. Rome did not become any more democratic. It remained largely a republic run by an elite oligarchy. As a republic, power was held by a body of citizens, rather than by a king or other single, powerful ruler.

Even though the Roman government was a republic run by an elite group of citizens, religion remained important to the Romans. They believed the state would only be successful with support from the various Roman gods. The government supported priests who carried out official rites and who appealed to the gods for guidance on Rome's behalf.

Research and Write

Roman religion was greatly influenced by the Greeks. They had many gods, each of whom had a name and presided over a specific part of the lives of the people. The Romans often adopted a Greek god, changing only his or her name. Identify the Roman name of each of the following Greek deities and what they presided over: Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Hestia, Aphrodite, Ares, Artemis, Athena, Demeter, and Hypnos.

Family Life in Republican Rome

In the Roman Republic, family life was an important part of the culture. Most Roman families considered the father to be the head of the household: What he said, the family did. We call this a patriarchal society, meaning the father makes most of the major decisions. The term patriarchal comes from the Latin words *patria potestas*, meaning “power of the father.”

And his power was extensive. For example, in theory a father always had power over his children as long as he was alive, no matter how old his children were. They could not acquire ownership of property or save any money of their own. They had no legal identification separate from their father. In reality, however, adult children did own personal property and amass savings, generally with the permission of their father.

Fathers also had power over life and death. By law and tradition, Roman fathers could order the execution of any of their children. This was rarely ordered against adult children. However, it was an acceptable practice to allow an unwanted infant to be exposed to the elements and abandoned to die, if the father did not want the child. This practice was done more often to female infants than male infants because boys were preferred by fathers. Boys could become productive citizens of the state.

A Roman father rarely discussed important issues with his family, including his wife. He did not even discuss important matters pertaining to the family with them. Instead, he had a close circle of friends who were considered his “council,” and he might ask them their opinions about a family matter before making a decision. In this way, family life in Rome was similar to the political processes found in the Roman Republic.

Roman wives abided by the decisions of their husbands. They had little voice in making family decisions and their opinions were not considered important.



Roman girls grew up quickly. Engaged by age 12 after their fathers picked their husbands for them, Roman girls were likely married by age 16 and had children shortly after that. People died young in the Roman Republic, and a woman might find herself widowed by her early twenties.

It was the wife's duty to keep up the home. A wealthy wife kept busy overseeing servants and making certain the household chores were completed. She watched over her children. A Roman wife might also keep the household records, keeping track of domestic expenses. Entertaining her husband's friends or accompanying him to public events or private dinners were among her other duties.

Children of wealthy parents were often taught at home by a hired tutor. Formal education began at age seven. School studies included learning to read and write in Latin. Discipline in school was strict. The mother was responsible for teaching her children moral virtues. Children were allowed to play outside the home, often in the streets, playing ball games and other activities.

Review and Write

In 50–100 words, express your opinion of the patriarchal system in Rome. How much authority should a father have over his family?

Roman Religion

During the early days of the Roman Republic, religion gained much importance. It began taking on the form it was to have during the greater part of Roman history.

In many ways, Roman religion was similar to that of the Greeks. Indeed, they borrowed many of the gods of the Greeks (*see page 5*) and renamed them. These renamed gods and goddesses typically performed the same duties and responsibilities as their Greek equivalents.

Chief among the gods of the Romans was Jupiter (the Greek name was Zeus), the god of the skies. Other gods included Juno (Hera to the Greeks), wife of Jupiter and goddess of marriage; Neptune (Poseidon to the Greeks), god of the waves; Venus (Aphrodite to the Greeks), goddess of love; and Minerva (Athena to the Greeks), goddess of wisdom.

Some of the Greek deities were taken on by the Romans without having their names changed, such as Apollo, god of music, and Pluto, god of the underworld.

Just as the Greeks did, the Romans practiced a religion which did not include much in the way of moral instruction or restrictive laws. Neither religion gave much importance to any rewards or punishments one might receive after death.

For the Romans, as for the Greeks, it was important to gain the favor of the gods to ensure success and security for the individual, as well as for the state. This relationship was called *pax deorum*, meaning "peace with the gods."

Priests and priestesses were given the responsibility of keeping the gods' favor. They performed regular rituals and hosted festivals and special sacrifices. Many of these festivals were related to the fertility of Roman fields and other farming activities. Priests might give special prayers to protect farmers

and their crops, including prayers against crop disease or failure.

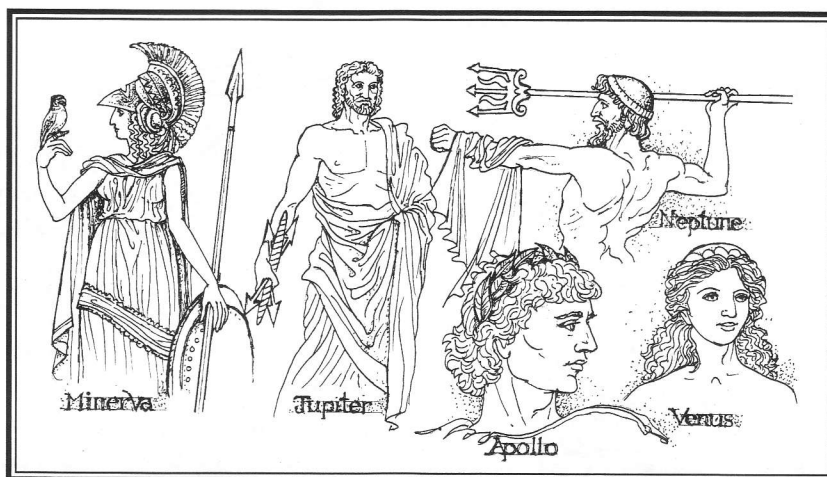
The duties and responsibilities of priests and priestesses were very important to the Romans. Chief among the priests was the *pontifex maximus*, a Latin title meaning "highest priest." He served as the head of a board of 15 priests who regulated the religion of the Romans.

The *pontifex maximus* not only had religious power, but also political power. Early in the Roman Republic, the *pontifex maximus* was seen as the head of the state religion. Many important political leaders in the Republic sought the position of highest priest.

His role became so important that no official state function could begin without first being

preceded by a special religious ritual. Even when the Senate met, the first order of business was always religious business.

In time, this connection between religion and the power of the state was to come together in the combination of a powerful ruler who was seen as a god. This did not happen until the collapse of the Roman Republic, when the Roman Empire was founded. Generally, the rulers of the Empire considered themselves to be deities worthy of worship.



Review and Write

In the United States, there is a separation between religion and government. In ancient Rome, the two were connected. Which do you believe to be the better situation: connection or separation between religion and the state? Why?

Expansion and Power in Republican Rome

Through years of war, the Romans were finally able to conquer all the tribes and city-states in Italy by 265 B.C. Everyone—from the Etruscans to the Greeks—had been subjugated by the Romans and were now part of the Republic.

These wars had all proven to be brutal and bloody. When the Roman army conquered a village or state, they frequently made slaves of the defeated people. Those who became Rome's allies soon began to pay tribute money to the Roman government as a sign of loyalty.



To maintain Roman power outside the region of Latium, the Romans began a policy of colonization. Roman citizens were planted throughout the countryside, creating a permanent presence for Rome in its conquered lands. Also, the Romans began building an extensive system of roads and bridges in Italy. This transportation system connected the conquered lands to Rome, allowing the Roman army and Roman traders to move anywhere with relative ease and speed. The result of such construction projects was the unification of the Roman lands into one culture and people. In a short period, Latin became the language of all of Italy.

However, the Greeks still continued to have a serious influence on the Romans. The Romans adopted Greek traditions of art, literature, and music. Even Roman architecture adapted its forms and structures from the Greeks.

During this period in Roman history, the number of citizens living in Rome and other cities in Italy increased dramatically. By 300 B.C., the pop-

ulation of the city of Rome may have stood at 150,000 people. Massive construction projects—temples, stadiums, government buildings—were erected all over the city.

Outside the city, a huge population supported Rome. Modern estimates put the number of people living outside of Rome at nearly 750,000. In addition to this almost one million total population in and around Rome, Italy may have been home to another three million people.

Much of the land controlled by the Roman Republic in Italy was public property, open to any Roman for use in grazing sheep or cattle. However, in time, the patricians of the Republic (aristocrats who were landowners) took control of larger tracts of land for their own private use. Since Rome controlled by then over 50,000 square miles of territory, land grabs by patricians were common and extensive. Often such control of formerly public lands was sanctioned by the Senate, which was the political haven of the patricians.

So important was land ownership in Republican Rome that it was the chief means of gaining prestige. All other forms of wealth were considered less important. Someone who made his fortune by engaging in business or trade was looked down on by the patricians. They considered businessmen inferior to themselves.

In fact, by the end of the 3rd century B.C., Roman senators and their sons were forbidden by law to engage in foreign trade. As a result, despite how wealthy a businessman might become, he was still considered a lesser to the patricians. All this led to a class rivalry that we shall see later in our study.

Review and Write

1. Why were extensive roads important in the Roman Republic?
2. Why do you think the patricians considered it so important to own large tracts of land?