

Introduction to the Romans

The material in this course stretches from the very beginnings of Rome's history in the 8th century BC right up to the might of the enormous Roman Empire in the 3rd century AD. In addition, some of the stories you will read are from a mythical world which the Romans believed predated any of their own history. This introduction is designed to give you an overview of the changes that took place within the Romans' society and culture during this vast time period. It will help you understand the broader context of the stories you will read across Books 1 and 2. On p4 there is a timeline, which will help you track some of the most important events in Rome's history.

Some of the words in the sections which follow are in **bold**: these highlight key parts of the Roman story, or the words which have a particular meaning in a Roman context.

ROME AND THE ROMANS

Rome began as a small city in central Italy. The earliest residents were mostly **farmers**. When their city was under attack, those farmers became soldiers in the Roman **army**. Early in its history, a strong army was essential for Rome to defend itself against repeated attacks on the city from its Italian neighbours. The idea of a community made up of hard-working farmers who were also brave soldiers doing their duty for Rome was essential to the Roman identity throughout Rome's history.

Later, military success led to greater and greater expansion of Roman **territory**. Territories which were ruled by a Roman governor were known as **provinces**. Over time, the small Italian city which started in the 8th century BC grew to be a capital city with an **empire** of more than 5 million square kilometers in size by the 2nd century AD. This expansion in territory brought with it growth in **population**: the Romans often granted citizen status to the communities who became part of their empire, and their population was also increased by the growing number of slaves, many of whom were prisoners of war. Over time, the small farms of the earliest Romans transformed into huge estates where hundreds of slaves laboured to feed the growing population. As their empire expanded, the Romans developed a series of growing **trade** networks on both land and sea. The enduring phrase that 'all roads lead to Rome' indicates the huge scale of roads and sea lanes under Rome's control. These trade networks not only kept the population of Rome fed, they also allowed for the exchange of goods from all over the known world. The buying and selling of everything from grain to silk contributed to the growing **wealth** of the Roman people.

With so much interaction with other parts of the world, both in military conquest and peaceful trade, it was inevitable that the **culture** of Roman society would also undergo a number of changes. Early in its history, the Romans adopted a number of customs from the **Etruscans**, the people who lived in the area just north of Rome. Gladiator fighting and chariot racing, two things the Romans are known for, were both originally Etruscan events. Much **Greek** culture was adopted by the Romans too, particularly after the conquest of Greece in 146 BC. The Romans borrowed ideas from Greek **architecture** in building their own public buildings, such as the Pantheon and the Colosseum. Ideas from Greek art dominated **Roman painting and sculpture**; some Roman artists even specialised in making copies of Greek artwork rather than creating their own. Greek **literature** was thought to be the best of its sort, and just as Roman artists reproduced Greek art, Roman authors believed that echoing Greek literature was a good way to display their own literary talent. Stories from Greek **mythology** heavily influenced the Romans' ideas too and they absorbed many aspects of Greek **religion**.

ROMAN GOVERNMENT

There were three major phases in the political history of Rome. To begin with, during the 8th–6th centuries BC Rome was ruled by **kings**, but it was not a hereditary monarchy. Instead, some kings were elected by the Roman people. Other kings used violence and took the throne for themselves.

Rome's first king, Romulus, invited the fathers of Rome's leading families to give advice on matters of government. These advisers were known as **senators**. Together, the senators were known as the **senate**. To begin with, there were 100 senators, but the number varied considerably over time.

In the 6th century BC there was a major revolution: the king at that time, Tarquinius Superbus, was driven out of Rome, and Rome became a **Republic** instead. This meant that power lay in the hands of the people. The senate continued to advise, but decisions had to be agreed by the **citizens**, who gathered together in **assemblies** to vote. The citizens also elected the **magistrates**, who were the men who carried out the business of government. Occasionally, in times of crisis, a **dictator** was appointed: a dictator was a man who was given temporary power to make decisions without the need for a vote in the assembly.

The Republic lasted for nearly 500 years, but at the end of the 1st century BC there was another major political change. Throughout the 1st century BC there had been a series of **civil wars**. The ultimate winner of these was a man called Octavian, who later became known as **Augustus**. Augustus became the first Roman **emperor**, and his adopted son, Tiberius, became emperor after Augustus' death. This established the principle that the position of emperor would be hereditary.

ROMAN SOCIETY

Most of the material in this course relates to the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD. By then, **citizens** of ancient Rome had a number of rights. A male Roman citizen was able to vote and he had the protection of the Roman court system. Female citizens, however, could not vote or be elected to hold a political office. For much of Roman history, women were also unable to enter contracts, own property or run a business without the agreement of a male guardian, though this changed over time.

Roman society was divided into classes. Membership of a class was largely based on birth or wealth. The highest class were the **patricians**. This class was based on birth, and referred to the members of the original families whose fathers (*patres*) had formed the first Roman senate. Any Roman citizen who was not a patrician was a **plebeian**. Working alongside these labels were the titles which showed a citizen's wealth or role in society. **Senators** were those who had been elected to the senate. Below those were the **equites**. This title is sometimes translated into English as **equestrian**. We still use this word to mean a horse-rider; early in Roman history, members of the Roman equestrian order were those who were wealthy enough to afford a horse to fight in the cavalry, rather than fighting as a foot soldier. Thus, being an equestrian was based on wealth. Any citizen could become an equestrian if he could prove he had property that was worth a certain amount of money.

Below the equestrians were five classes of citizenships all based on wealth and property, simply called the first, second, third, fourth and fifth classes. The lowest class of all, the *proletarii*, was below the fifth class and had the least money and land.

As mentioned above, the Romans also had many **slaves**. Some slaves had been taken as prisoners of war, others were born or sold into slavery. Slaves performed all sorts of jobs such as basic household tasks, hard manual labour, complex affairs such as managing business finances, and anything or everything in between. For much of Roman history, slaves had no rights and their masters were free to do whatever they wished to them. It is hard to know the number of slaves, but scholars have estimated that by the end of the 1st century BC the ratio of slave:free citizens may have been as high as 1:3. Slaves who had been given the chance to earn their freedom or who had been given their freedom as a mark of gratitude were known as **freedmen**. Freedmen were granted citizenship and enrolled in the class that matched their wealth. Some freedmen went on to become very wealthy and accomplished men and, during some periods in history, their sons could go on to hold political office.

TIMELINE

This timeline will help you understand how some of the important events and the people you will meet in Chapters 1–6 of *de Romanis* fit into the broader span of Rome's history.

the very beginnings of time		The mythical origin of the world, and the rise of the Olympian gods.
pre-9th century BC		The age of heroes, many of whom fought in the great war between Troy and Greece. The founding father of the Romans, Aeneas , was believed to have fought in the Trojan War. When Troy lost, he travelled to Italy to start a new community there.
8th–7th centuries BC		Greek myths and legends began to be written down. In later centuries, many of these stories were adopted by the Romans and absorbed into Roman culture.
mid-8th century BC	Roman kings	Romulus and Remus , the twin sons of the god Mars, were believed to have founded a small city in central Italy. Romulus killed his brother and the city was named Rome.
late 6th century BC		The Romans expelled their last king and became a Republic. Their last king, Tarquinius Superbus , sought help from Rome's neighbours, the Etruscans. Several Roman heroes, such as Mucius Scaevola , Horatius Cocles and Cloelia , participated in the war that followed.
5th century BC		The city-states of Greece at this time led the Western world in art, architecture, literature and philosophy. In time, their achievements in these fields would all influence Roman culture heavily.
4th century BC		Tribes from modern-day France, known as the Gauls , attacked the city of Rome and nearly won. The Romans were able to repel their stealth attack because of a warning from Juno's sacred geese .
3rd century BC	The Roman Republic	The Romans fought wars against and eventually defeated their rival Carthage , leaving Rome the dominant power in the Mediterranean.
2nd century BC		Rome defeated Greece and absorbed much of Greek culture.
1st century BC		Roman society struggled to handle the imbalance in power its growing wealth and success brought. This led to slave uprisings and widespread civil wars.
		Julius Caesar , the famous general, led his army in a civil war against Pompey and the Roman senate. Caesar defeated his opponents and was appointed dictator for life. Many Romans believed that he wanted to be king, and on this basis he was assassinated in 44 BC. His death triggered another civil war and paved the way for Augustus , the first emperor, to come to power.
		Augustus ended the civil wars and became the first Roman emperor. He declared peace across the Roman empire.
1st century AD		In AD 79, watched by the historian Pliny, the volcano Mount Vesuvius erupted near Pompeii , a Roman town in the Bay of Naples. The falling ash preserved a great deal of evidence of daily life in a Roman town.
	Roman emperors	The enormous amphitheatre known as the Colosseum was built.
2nd century AD		In AD 117 The Roman empire reached its greatest size under the emperor Trajan .
		The emperor Hadrian rebuilt the Pantheon , Rome's most well-known temple.