



**GAIUS OCTAVIUS**

Given the title "Augustus" by the Roman Senate, he is portrayed as ruler and military commander in this idealized statue.

Scala/Art Resource, NY

## Chapter Five

# THE EMPIRE AND CHRISTIANITY

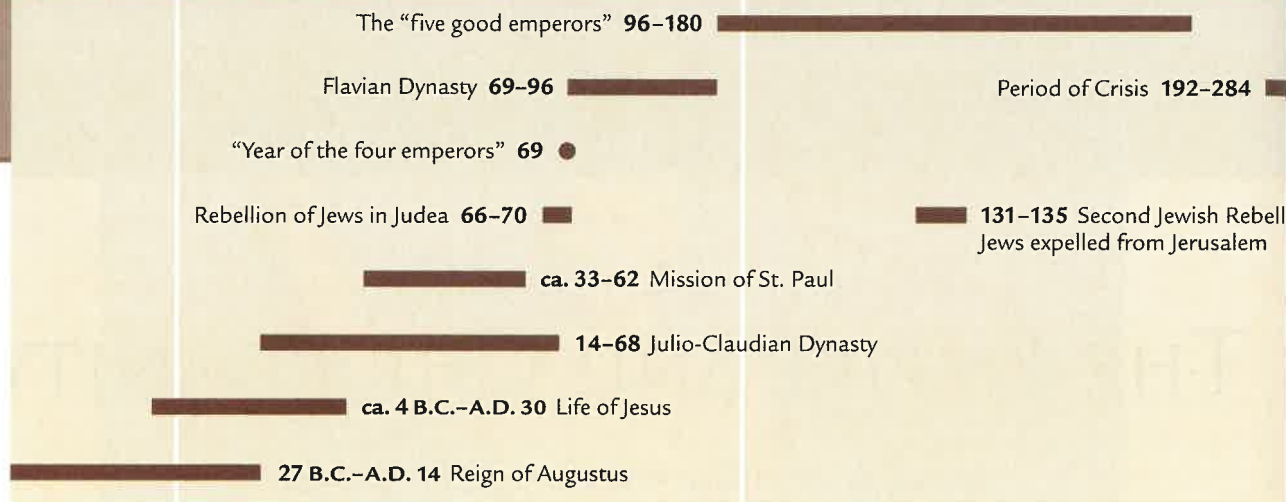
THE EMPIRE AT ITS HEIGHT • THE PERIOD OF CRISIS (192–284) •  
THE LATE ROMAN EMPIRE • CHRISTIANITY AND ITS EARLY RIVALS

The history of the Roman Empire is one of amazing continuity. The system of government devised by Augustus and maintained by his successors gave the Empire two centuries of solid prosperity. Historians call this the period of the *Pax Romana*, “the Roman Peace,” and the Empire as a system of government remained an ideal in Europe for centuries. In the history of the Empire, the first main theme is the working of a cohesive political organization. The carefully crafted administration managed the greatest of all ancient empires, and its remains—stadiums, public baths, marketplaces, temples, official buildings—have inspired imitations down into our own times.

At the height of the Empire, the Roman world enjoyed a period of enviable prosperity. Remarkably, trade reached as far as China, where Rome obtained the lux-

ury of silk, brought back along the famous Silk Road. But at the beginning of the third century, the Empire entered a period of crisis. Control of the army became the key to power, and emperors and would-be emperors followed one another in confusing succession. When order finally returned during the late third and fourth centuries, the old Roman Empire was no more. In the East, the Byzantine Empire was formed; in the West, the Empire steadily declined, finally ceasing to be governed by Rome in A.D. 476.

But even as antiquity was passing, its peoples were laying the basis for a new form of civilization. A change of religion became the second large historical theme in the Empire, as a new set of beliefs emerged—Christianity, which was destined to transform the life and culture of the Western heirs of the Roman Empire.



## THE EMPIRE AT ITS HEIGHT

Three unifying elements preserved the Roman Empire that Augustus founded. First was the figure of the emperor, whom all subjects identified as the head of the regime. With some exceptions, the emperors were competent, stable rulers until about A.D. 200. Second were the civil servants and city councils, who collected taxes and maintained urban life. Third was the army, both the ultimate security of the emperor himself and the protector of the frontiers. The three elements supported one another, and the failure of any one of them threatened the other two and thus the fabric of the state (see "Tacitus on the Powers of Augustus," p. 121).

### *The Successors of Augustus*

**The Julio-Claudian Dynasty** The first emperor, Augustus, had no male heir. His last wife, Livia, was from the old patrician clan of the Claudians and evidently persuaded him to adopt her son, Tiberius, and to designate Tiberius as his successor. She thus played a leading role in shaping the imperial dynasty.

After the death of Augustus in A.D. 14, the Senate recognized Tiberius as ruler and thus confirmed the principle of dynastic succession, establishing the fact that an empire, not a republic, now existed. The dynasty founded by Augustus is known as the Julio-Claudian, because of a complex series of marriages between the Julian and Claudian clans. This dynasty reigned until A.D. 68. Much can be said against the rule of the **Julio-Claudians**. Tiberius was morbid, suspicious, and vengeful. His successor, Gaius (nicknamed Caligula), suffered from insanity and was murdered by the emperor's bodyguard, known as the Praetorian Guard. Claudius was gullible and was manipulated by his assistants and wives, the last of whom probably poi-

soned him to secure the throne for her son Nero. Nero ruled with some efficiency for his first five years but then became one of the worst emperors, whose tyranny led to a rebellion in Gaul. When the revolt spread to Rome, he saw that he was doomed and killed himself.

Yet these emperors did maintain, and even expand the heritage left by Augustus. Claudius, for example, saw to the conquest of southern Britain, which became a Roman province in A.D. 47. He established new provinces and founded the city of Cologne in what is now Germany. Moreover, the Empire remained at peace internally, and the provincial administration that Augustus had established continued to function effectively.

**Imperial Administration** The process of centralization of power in the person of the emperor and away from the Senate continued. Tiberius transferred election of magistrates from the people to the Senate; in effect, those whom he "recommended" were automatically elected. Claudius turned many affairs of state over to his trusted assistants, usually Greeks freed from slavery (thus called *freedmen*), who helped to found the bureaucracy that more and more ran the Empire.

**Interventions by the Army** Another factor that weakened senatorial power was the frequent interference in affairs of state by the Praetorian Guard. The Guard first intervened in politics in 41, when it forced the Senate to recognize Claudius as emperor. It did the same for Nero in 54. This repeated invasion of civil authority by the Praetorian Guard was a step on the road toward militarization; within little more than a century, the emperors were to become totally dependent for power on their ability to buy the good will of the soldiery. The army, which had kept the emperors secure, sometimes became a force beyond control.

284–305 Reign of Diocletian

303–313 “Great” Persecution of Christians

324–337 Reign of Constantine

● 325 Church Council at Nicea

ca. 340–ca. 420

Life of Jerome, translator of Vulgate Bible

354–430

Life of Augustine of Hippo

● 395 Division of the Empire into East and West

“Fall” of Rome; end of Western Empire proclaimed 476 ●



## TACITUS ON THE POWERS OF AUGUSTUS

*The first emperor of Rome, Augustus, maintained that he had restored the Republic after years of civil war. The historian Tacitus, writing about A.D. 120, gave a different evaluation of his work.*

“After Brutus and Cassius were killed, the state had no military force. . . . Even the party of Julius Caesar had no leader left but Augustus, who laid aside the title of Triumvir and called himself a consul. For controlling the people, he contented himself with the rights of a tribune. When he had seduced the army with gifts, the people with distributions of food, and everyone with the pleasure of general calm, he began little by little to increase his authority and to gather to himself the powers of the Senate, the magistrates, and the laws. No one opposed him, since the strongest men had fallen either in battle or through legalized executions, and the rest of the nobles, according to who was more ready to

accept servitude, were awarded gifts and public offices, since they profited from the new arrangements, they preferred their present security to the previous uncertainties. The provinces, too, accepted this state of affairs, since the former government by the Senate and people was suspect, owing to the struggles among the powerful and the greed of local governors; the protection of the laws had been worthless, because the laws were constantly overturned by violence, intrigue, and finally outright bribery.”

From Tacitus, *Annals*, Book 1, ch. 2, M. H. Chambers (tr.).

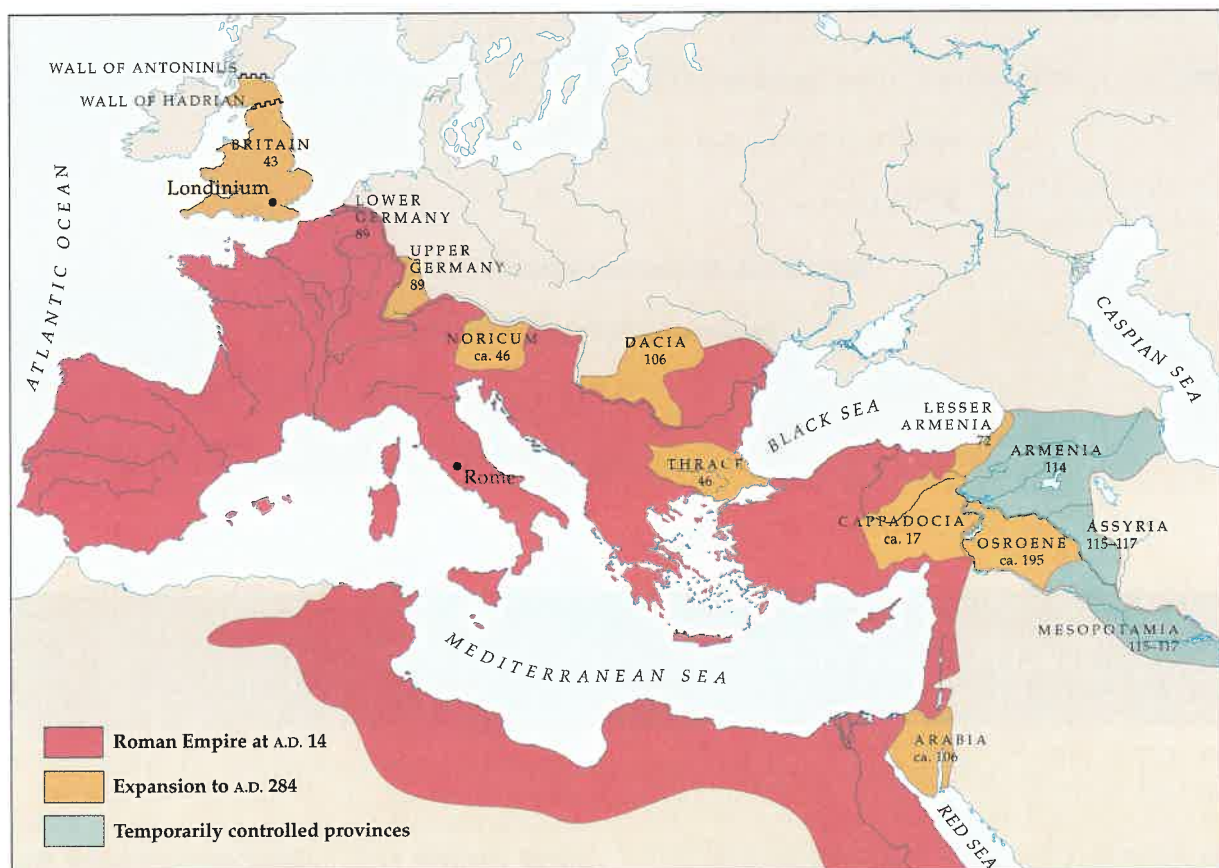
The military played a significant role in the struggle over the succession after Nero’s death in 68, as troops in various quarters of the Empire backed their own candidates for emperor. The year 69 is often called “the year of the four emperors” because in the course of the year four men claimed to be emperor. Vespasian finally stabilized the situation and emerged as sole ruler late in 69. He founded the Flavian Dynasty (so called from his second name, Flavius), which lasted through his reign and those of his two sons, Titus and Domitian.

### **The Five Good Emperors**

The Flavian Dynasty ended in violence in 96, when a group of senators instigated the murder of the emperor

Domitian, Vespasian’s despotic son. The Senate then picked a quiet older senator, Nerva (r. 96–98), to be the new emperor. Nerva, who was childless, adopted an experienced military officer, Trajan, and designated him as his successor. The next two emperors, also childless, did the same. This system remained in use for nearly a century: An emperor would choose a qualified successor and adopt him as his son, thus ensuring a peaceful transfer of power. The men thus chosen were so capable that historians have called Nerva and the next four rulers the “five good emperors.”

**Trajan and Hadrian** On the whole, in the period of the five good emperors, the Empire remained stable and even expanded. Trajan was an active military emperor



MAP 5.1 THE ROMAN EMPIRE, A.D. 14–284

This map shows the state of the Empire—the world's largest down to this time—from the death of Augustus to the accession of Diocletian. The largest permanent conquest was that of Britain. Note that the expansion in the extreme East was only temporary. Which was the last permanent acquisition in this period?

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and conquered the region of Dacia, north of the Danube River. This was Rome's only permanent conquest north of the Danube and established a home for speakers of Latin; their descendants occupy modern Romania. In 116 Trajan drove the Empire to its farthest extension to the east as he established control over the Tigris-Euphrates valley as far as the head of the Persian Gulf, but he died while trying to return to Rome. Hadrian, his successor, decided to withdraw from this extreme eastern position; he thus changed from a policy of aggressive to defensive imperialism.

Trajan and Hadrian also undertook vast building programs. Trajan erected many structures throughout the Empire. Especially, he built a huge new forum (the Forum of Trajan) in central Rome and placed there an impressive column, which preserves a series of scenes recording episodes in his wars north of the Danube. This new Forum had a large group of buildings—shops, offices, a library—to the east of his column. Hadrian's

most famous building project is Hadrian's wall (much of it still stands), built across Britain to protect the frontier between the Roman province of Britain and the areas controlled by Celtic tribes to the north. In Italy, among other projects, he had built an immense luxurious "villa," actually a small town, south of Rome near Tivoli.

Hadrian continued the development of a frank autocracy. Laws now came down straight from the emperor and were known as "decisions" (*constitutiones*). Often the Senate was not even formally invited to approve such laws. He sought advice from an informal council known as the "friends" (*amici*) of the emperor, which included the leading experts in Roman law. One of these, Salvius Julianus, collected the edicts that Roman praetors had issued over the centuries, in an attempt to standardize the procedures of civil law; this action pointed the way toward the great codification of law in the sixth century under the emperor Justinian.

(see chapter 6). Hadrian's laws, though issued without any pretense of democratic process, were generally fair and humane. They tried to improve the condition of



soldiers and slaves and gave women the same rights in court as men.

**Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius** Hadrian arranged the succession of the next two emperors, Antoninus Pius (r. 138–161) and Marcus Aurelius (r. 161–180), who are the last of the “five good emperors.” The rule of Antoninus was peaceful, and under the reign of Marcus Aurelius the Empire enjoyed its last years of prosperity. Meanwhile, hostile new peoples were massing to the north and east of the imperial frontiers. In the final years of Marcus’ reign, the gathering storm broke in all its fury, and he had to spend years fighting invasions by peoples on the Danube River and in the East.

One campaign was especially disastrous, because the army returning from Asia Minor in the 160s brought with it a devastating plague that spread through much of Europe. This plague must have been one cause of the later weakening of Rome, but the nearly total lack of records prevents our knowing how many died.

Unfortunately, Marcus abandoned the principle of adoption and passed the throne to his worthless son, Commodus (r. 180–192), whose extravagance and cruelty were reminiscent of Nero and Domitian. His murder on the last day of 192 opened a period of terrible instability, to which we shall return (pp. 133–134).

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In A.D. 113 the emperor Trajan erected a monumental column to celebrate his war against peoples living across the Danube River. These panels show preparations for the war. Note the figure of the river god at the bottom, under a bridge built for the army.

Trée



#### HADRIAN'S WALL

The emperor Hadrian had this famous wall built across Britain to mark off the Roman Empire and keep foreign peoples out.

C. M. Dixon



MAP 5.2 THE CITY OF ROME IN THE EMPIRE

On this map, note the buildings—above all, large public baths—built by several emperors. Please compare this map to map 4.1 (p. 96) to observe the growth of the city. The westward expansion across the Tiber River is known today as Trastevere (“trans-Tiber”). On which hill was the Palace of Augustus?

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## Roman Imperial Civilization

**The Economy of the Cities** The first two centuries of the Empire are often called the “higher” Empire. In this period Italy and the provinces reached a level of prosperity and of flourishing population that Europe would not see again for a thousand years. The results of Roman censuses, which have partially survived, indicate that Italy at the death of Augustus contained about 7.5 million inhabitants. (In about 1500, the earliest date at which we can make a comparable estimate, the same area contained about 10 million people.)

**Cities in the Empire** In the Western provinces, cities were, for the most part, small; to judge from the area enclosed by Roman walls, most towns contained only a

few thousand residents. Yet they usually imitated Rome with temples, markets, arenas, courthouses, and other public buildings and thus displayed an authentic urban character. In the East, cities were often much larger. Alexandria in Egypt is estimated to have had about 400,000 inhabitants; Ephesus in Asia Minor, 200,000; Antioch in Syria, 150,000. The size of the cities in the East is surely one reason why the economy in the Eastern part of the Empire was stronger than that in the Western part.

Largest of all the imperial cities, and a true wonder of the ancient world, was Rome. Estimates of its size generally suggest about 1 million inhabitants. Not until the eighteenth century would European cities again contain such a concentration of people; in the 1780s, for example, Paris held about 600,000 people. Roman



An arch built by the emperor Trajan at Beneventum. Some panels show sacrifices to the gods, and the whole was intended to commemorate Trajan's generosity to his people. Triumphal and commemorative arches were among the proudest monuments in Rome and have been imitated in many modern cities.

Nimatallah/Art Resource, NY

civil engineering maintained, even under crowded conditions, acceptable standards of public hygiene and supplied enormous quantities of pure water and food.

**Agriculture** Agriculture still remained the basic support of the economy, supplying, according to rough estimates, more than 75 percent of the total product of the Empire. One important change in Italian agriculture in the last century of the Republic had been shrinkage in the number of small peasant farms. They gave way to great slave-run estates, called *latifundia*, which generally produced cash crops. The owners of the big *latifundia* were wealthy senators and equestrians, even entrepreneurs from outside the traditional governing classes. Trimalchio, a freed slave who appears as a character in Petronius' novel, the *Satyricon*, boasted that he could ride from Rome to the area near Naples without leaving his own land.

The managers of these vast plantations favored varied forms of agriculture—cultivating vines, olives, and fruit and raising large numbers of cattle, sheep, and goats. Only enough grain was cultivated to feed the resident staff of workers, most of them slaves. The great estates also supplied the cities with building stone, lumber, and firewood; huge quantities of wood were required, for example, to keep the Roman baths at comfortable temperatures. In the view of many historians, extensive deforestation and overgrazing led inevitably to erosion of the land and the loss of fertile topsoil—principal reasons for the economic decline of Roman Italy. Even ancient peoples had the power to injure their environments.

**Economies in the Provinces** In the provinces, the "Roman peace" favored the development of what had once been backward areas to the point that they threatened



A well-preserved apartment house (second to third century A.D.) in the city of Ostia, which served Rome as a port. The dwelling space is located over shops on the ground floor. The tradition of snack bars everywhere in Rome and Italy is an old one.

C. M. Dixon



Italy's economic leadership. The wine market, for example, passed into the hands of Spanish cultivators in the second century, for Spanish wine rivaled Italian in quality and was cheaper to produce, thanks to lower labor costs. In some areas of industry, too, the provinces began to outrun Italian production.

One of the main Italian industries was pottery, but by about A.D. 50 pottery made in Gaul had replaced Italian pottery even in Italy and had also taken over the market in the provinces and military camps. Thus Rome's success in establishing a commercial network created markets for products from the provinces and eventually contributed to Italy's own economic decline.

**City Life in Italy** The upper class in Rome lived on a far higher scale, and was more widely separated from the common people, than the rich of Greece. The wealthy had running water tapped into their homes, slaves to tend them hand and foot, and elegant country villas for recreation. Hadrian's villa, or country retreat, near Rome was the size of a small city. These villas approached economic self-sufficiency, because slaves manufactured articles of light industry (clothing, leather goods, domestic utensils) on the farms.

A modern feature of Roman cities was the existence of suburbs and resorts. Pompeii was a commercial town, but its neighbor Herculaneum was a residential suburb. Both towns, buried and thus preserved by the volcanic eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79, contain examples of the airy Roman house, built around a central open court, or atrium, and decorated with graceful wall paintings.

**The Working Classes** The workers of Rome had no such elegant housing, living rather in flimsy and inflammable apartments in high-rise buildings. They often had to plod up a hundred steps or more to their crowded rooms. A bed was the only place for sitting or eating, and the window opened to a noisy street. Rooms lacked running water, but a complex system of aqueducts gave easy access to water outside the home, and Rome always took pride in its enormous, cheap public baths.

There were associations in Rome for every kind of worker: fishermen, engineers, cobblers, silk workers, and so on. Despite their small, crowded apartments, city laborers had working conditions that were beyond the dreams of a Near Eastern peasant. They worked only about six or seven hours a day, and the Roman year contained about 160 holidays, to which the state added from time to time special days of celebration. The modern American actually works longer hours than the ancient Roman, despite our labor-saving devices.

**Social Conditions** The major amusements for the people during days of leisure were public games, especially chariot races, which brought honor and wealth to the skilled charioteers, in arenas such as the huge Circus Maximus. Besides races, the Romans gave themselves over to brutal contests, which sometimes went on to death, between professional gladiators and between men and animals. The main arena for these spectacles was the grandiose Colosseum, begun by the emperor Vespasian in the 70s. It held about 50,000 spectators, and much of it still stands in central Rome, probably the one monument that most vividly recalls the classical city.

Rome was wealthy enough to support roughly half its population at public expense through free allotments of food, especially grain, which was the most common item in the diet. In the less prosperous years after 200, the cost of these subsidies placed a heavy strain on the Empire's economy.

**Expansion of Trade** In the late Republic, and even more during the general prosperity of the Empire, industry and trade broke new frontiers. In 25–24 B.C. the emperor Augustus directed an expedition into Arabia for the sake of expanded trade; at about the same time he received envoys from India, surely for the same purpose, and he made treaties with the Parthians of Asia Minor to seek trading facilities in that region. Such commercial explorations were dramatically enhanced by long-distance trade, in both directions, with China, along the famous Silk Road (see "Rome and China: The Silk Road," pp. 128–130).

**The Mixture in Society** Social mobility became easier under the Empire. For example, some Greeks who had been freed from slavery enjoyed enviable careers as secretaries to emperors or as businessmen. The need for more troops opened new opportunities for provincials, who entered the Roman legions, especially during the second century and later; and even the Senate began to include men born in the provinces. In time the Empire became less "Roman," for in both manpower and economic strength the primacy of Italy was of the past.

**Women and the Family** The gains in the status of women continued in the Empire, above all within the families of the ruling elite, who lived in remarkable luxury. But more than this, women in the court of the emperor could even achieve political power comparable to that of such queens in the Hellenistic Age as Cleopatra. Livia, the last wife of Augustus, is said to have met with ambassadors of foreign states in the absence of Augustus and to have seen to the advancement of her political favorites. As we have seen, Augustus adopted her son, Tiberius, who became the second emperor of Rome; when Augustus died and was officially proclaimed a god, Livia became the priestess of his cult and received the title *Augusta*, a parallel to his own name Augustus.

Later in the history of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, Agrippina the Younger, a descendant of Augustus, showed equal political skill in getting her son chosen as the emperor Nero. She married the emperor Claudius, who already had a son from another marriage, and then persuaded Claudius to adopt her son; she probably poisoned Claudius and then obtained the support of the Praetorian Guard for Nero, whom the Senate recognized as emperor. Her influence over Nero in his early years made her almost a co-emperor, and her face appeared on official coins along with his.

The faces of other mothers and wives of emperors were struck on coins, and there were statues to women of the imperial court at many places in the Empire. Of course, not many women could attain such eminence, and the traditional values remained for most women: chastity and deference to the husband, loving care toward the children. In a famous epitaph, a Roman butcher said of his wife,

She preceded me in death, my one and only, chaste in body,  
loving in spirit, faithful to her faithful husband, always  
cheerful, never neglecting her duty through greed.

**Roman Law** A complex system of law and procedure was one of the chief cultural contributions of Roman civilization. Roman law had already developed under the Republic, but its further development under the Empire made it even more all-embracing. The Stoic philosophy influenced Roman legal thought, through the idea that the universe is inherently rational and that life should be guided by reason. Moreover, Roman legal thought recognized a kind of *natural law*, valid for all people, which could be discovered through rational inquiry. At times, especially in periods of crisis, weaker members of society could not always obtain justice; but the overriding social purpose of Roman law was to provide justice rather than simply maintain the stability of the state. As an example, natural law denied the legality of slavery.

**The Growth of the Roman Legal System** The assemblies of the Republic, both that of the Centuries and that of the Tribes (see chapter 4), issued laws mainly on large public issues, such as distributions of land or assignments of military commands overseas. Another influence on the law came from magistrates, especially praetors, who issued edicts that explained the principles by which they would interpret the law during their year in office; these edicts acquired the authority of tradition and ultimately passed into permanent law.

Normally, cases came before a judge, who was a private citizen relying on the advice of other private citizens who were reputed to understand the law but did not actually practice law. These advisers were called jurists (*iurisprudentes* or *iurisconsulti*), and their opinions constantly influenced the growth of the law, especially in the first two centuries of the Empire. They could also rise to high political office. Among the most important jurists were Ulpian, Paulus, and Gaius. They delivered written responses, with authority delegated to them by the emperors, to questions raised by presiding judges and relied mainly on "natural law" for their opinions. Their responses thus shaped Roman laws, even when the laws themselves were issued by emperors as constitutions. They also wrote voluminous commentaries on the law, and their opinions are widely preserved in the final great codification of the law by Justinian in the sixth century.

# Global Moment

## ROME AND CHINA: THE SILK ROAD

The Silk Road captivates the popular imagination today as one of the oldest and most productive links between East and West in ancient history. The road was a key trade route by which commodities and ideas were exchanged from as far east as China and as far west as the Roman world. It got its popular name in the nineteenth century from the German geographer F. von Richthofen, who named it the "Seidenstrasse" (Silk Road) after one of the chief products to come out of China. Those who used this road traveled across harsh deserts and hostile territories to profit from the trade in merchandise such as fine silks, spices, and jewels. This trade flourished during the Han Dynasty of China (206 B.C.–A.D. 220) and during the height of expansion in the Roman Republic and early Roman Empire.

The Silk Road was not one single road as the name suggests, but actually comprised several different routes; in general, it ran for more than 4,000 miles between eastern China and the seaports of the Mediterranean. We do not have precise dates for when the different sections were developed, but we can describe the route at its most nearly complete stage. Its easternmost point is usually identified with modern-day Xi'an (or Sian). Proceeding from there, south of the Great Wall of China, it ran west to Dunhuang. From there, it split and reunited many times, across desert and over mountains before reaching its westernmost point, just south of modern Baghdad, on the Euphrates River (see map). Ships could then sail up the Euphrates to a Roman camp named Zeugma. Goods could travel a short distance westward by land and reach the great port of Antioch, near the mouth of the Orontes River. From here ships could sail through the Mediterranean Sea until they reached the west coast of Italy and Rome.

Silk was not the only product transported on the road, but it was probably considered the most remarkable one in the West, desired chiefly for its luxurious quality (the Chinese guarded the source and process

with the utmost secrecy). In fact, the Latin name for the Chinese was *Seres*, which means silk, and China thus became known as the "land of silk," *Serica* or *Terra Serica*. From the West, China received clothing, glass, rugs, and precious metals—including prized gold—from the Roman world.

Roman writers were well aware of the trade among the Empire, India, and China. One Roman source states that one pound of silk was considered equal in value to the same weight in gold (*Scriptores Historiae Augustae*, Life of Aurelianus, chap. 45). This may be an exaggeration, like our saying that something is "worth its weight in gold," but in the first century A.D. the encyclopedist Pliny the Elder (*Natural History*, 12.84) looked with disfavor on the trade in such luxuries, recording that the Roman trade with India, China, and Arabia cost the Romans 100 million sesterces (small silver coins, perhaps about five million dollars) in trading deficits. That is, the balance of trade was in favor of the eastern nations.

As the different cultures came into contact through trade, they also learned something about each other's appearances, customs, and practices. Chinese impressions of the Romans are documented in sources that refer to the Roman Empire as Ta Ch'in; this was actually the general region of Syria, where the Silk Road ended in the West. Chinese sources report as follows:

The country of Ta Ch'in is situated on the western part of the sea. The defenses of the cities are made of stone. The inhabitants of that country are tall and well-proportioned, somewhat like the Chinese, whence they are called Ta Ch'ins. The country contains much gold, silver, and rare precious stones, especially the "jewel that shines at night" [the diamond?], "the moonshine pearl," corals, amber, glass, green jadestone, gold-embroidered rugs, and thin silk-cloth of various colors. They make gold-colored cloth and asbestos cloth. All the rare gems of other foreign countries come from there. They make coins of gold and silver. Ten units of silver are worth one of gold. They traffic by sea with Ahn-si (Parthia) and T'ien-chu (India), the profit of which trade is ten-fold. They are honest in their transactions, and there are no double prices. Their kings always desired to send embassies to China, but the

An-his (Parthians) wished to carry on trade with them in Chinese silks, and it is for this reason that they were cut off from communication.

These records are interesting not only because they reveal some of the earliest known Chinese impressions of the Romans, but because they tell of the many products that exchanged hands, and of the role of the Parthians, whose kingdom included the territory of Persia located directly between Rome and China. While it is likely that merchandise changed hands many times over such a long route, the Parthians were especially well placed to profit as middlemen along the Silk Road. In an effort to cut off the Parthians' profit, both Rome and China sent emissaries in search of each other. For instance, in A.D. 97 Gang Ying, a Chinese ambassador, traveled as far west as Mesopotamia but was prevented (or persuaded) from going directly west into Syria. Instead, he was conveyed south to the head of the Persian Gulf and was told, "The sea is vast and great; with favorable winds it is possible to cross within three months; but if you meet slow winds, it may also take you two years." At this point, he returned home.

Romans also traveled toward China. Coins of the emperor Marcus Aurelius and his predecessor, Antoninus Pius, have been found in the Far East, and Chinese sources from A.D. 166 report the arrival of Romans claiming to represent Marcus Aurelius. Very little information on this encounter is preserved, but sources do reveal that the Romans presented modest gifts or ivory, rhinoceros horns, and tortoise shells, which suggest that it was an expedition of private traders rather than one sent by the emperor of Rome, who likely would have produced more lavish gifts.

Over the next few centuries, the Western demand for silk, especially for church and royal garments, continued to grow to such a degree that in A.D. 552 the Byzantine emperor Justinian in Constantinople intervened in the trade. The historian Procopius (*History of the Wars*, 1.20.9–12) reports that Justinian proposed to

the king of the Ethiopians that he should cooperate with Justinian in securing a supply of silk for the two nations. At this time, the once weakened Persian Empire had revived under the Sassanid Dynasty and was finding ways to use its new influence by blocking trade in silk from India and China by land routes, including the Silk Road. Moreover, Persian merchants often placed themselves in harbors where the ships from India, carrying silk, used to dock. They often bought up the whole cargo of silk and thus frustrated the Byzantine Empire's access to it.

Apparently Justinian was not successful in his attempt to work with the Ethiopians to acquire more silk, and the Chinese were not eager to let the source, the valuable silkworms, escape their control. According to Procopius, who continues the story (*Wars*, 8.17.1–8), two monks, who had traveled in India and China and learned the secrets of silkworm cultivation and weaving, assured Justinian that they could free him from having to buy silk from the Persians. The precious silkworms could not be brought to Constantinople alive, but it would be possible to convey their offspring as unhatched eggs. The monks faithfully transported some of the eggs back to Constantinople—according to another source, in hollow canes. The eggs were then buried in dung and, when sufficiently heated, they produced the worms. The worms then fed on the leaves of the mulberry tree, which grew widely in Syria. This stratagem laid the foundation for the manufacture of silk in Europe. In the Byzantine Empire, silk production was a carefully guarded secret, and its manufacture and distribution became a royal monopoly.

The Silk Road continued in use by merchants and travelers, but by about 1100 the trade with the West was seriously weakened through attacks on the Byzantine Empire. For example, the Seljuk Turks began an onslaught against the Empire from the east. At the battle of Manzikert (modern Malazgirt in eastern Turkey), north of Lake Van, in 1071, the Seljuks annihilated a

*continued*



**THE SILK ROAD BETWEEN CHINA AND THE WEST**

Merchants and traders carried silk and other products on this road for centuries. It also became an important artery for all kinds of cultural exchange. What was the farthest point that the road reached toward the West?

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Byzantine army and took the emperor Romanus IV Diogenes prisoner. He died in the next year, and soon afterward Byzantine power in Asia Minor collapsed. However, by this time the manufacture of silk had spread to Sicily and Spain in the hands of the Arabs, and later it also spread through the cities of Italy northward into Europe. As the West was able to produce more of its own silk, its demand for silk from China lessened. In addition, the development of sea routes offered alternatives to the challenging land routes. The Silk Road traffic declined.

To the historian, the importance of the Silk Road is not limited to its commercial aspects. Valuable commodities had been exchanged overland for millennia by way of the Road, but as merchants and traders met

one another along the Road a significant series of intellectual exchanges also took place. The great trade route may have reached its supreme importance in the world of faith. The major religions of modern times—first Buddhism, then Christianity (of the “Nestorian” kind), and finally Islam—followed the ancient traders on this long highway and planted the beliefs among the peoples. Seen in this light, the Silk Road must also be called one of the most important arteries of intellectual and spiritual life in the history of the world.

The Chinese sources quoted here, known as Dynastic Histories, are taken from F. Hirth, *China and the Roman Orient*, Shanghai 1885, reprinted Chicago 1975 (language modified).

**Citizens and Noncitizens in Roman Law** The Romans distinguished their own citizens from the other peoples under their control. Roman citizens were subject to the "civil law" (*ius civile*), or law applying to citizens. The number of people subject to this law grew constantly as citizenship was extended to more and more inhabitants. Finally, the emperor Caracalla decreed that all free men and women in the Empire should be citizens, thus subject to the *ius civile*.

Down to the time of this mass grant of Roman citizenship, inhabitants of the Empire who were not citizens had the right to maintain many of their own customs, which came to form the *ius gentium*, or law applying to other nations. These two kinds of law fell, logically enough, to two magistrates for administration, the "urban praetor" (*praetor urbanus*) and the "traveling praetor" (*praetor peregrinus*). But when all free men and women became citizens, the *ius gentium* in this sense was no longer needed.<sup>1</sup>

The Romans' respect for their law is consistent with the remarkable cohesiveness that one sees throughout their society. In war they were often brutal, but then so were many others in all periods of history. Rome's achievement in designing and preserving a system of laws governing the behavior of citizens toward one another has served as a model for much of the law of Western Europe. Codes of law, as we have also observed, are a feature of several other ancient societies, but in richness and complexity the codifications of the late Roman Empire easily surpass all the rest.

**Engineering and Architecture** The Romans showed brilliance in the fields of engineering and construction. The most enduring monument to Roman civilization is the impressive network of roads found everywhere from Britain to Africa. Originally designed as highways for the rapid movement of legions, these roads became trade routes in more peaceful times and eliminated all barriers to travel.

From the earliest times the Romans also built aqueducts that converged toward the cities, sloping down and carrying fresh water from the mountains; Rome's imposing system of sewers was constantly flushed by water from the aqueducts. The Romans placed more emphasis on personal cleanliness than did any other civilization until modern times. Several emperors commissioned the building of immense public baths, of which the grandest of all were the Baths of Caracalla at Rome, built in the third century. The English city of Bath is named for the facilities that the Romans built there.

<sup>1</sup> In Roman legal theory, *ius gentium* came to mean a kind of universal law observed by all nations, in effect, a system of law that could be discovered by reason.



The Sacred Way leads into the Roman Forum through the Arch of Titus, which was erected to celebrate the end of the great Jewish rebellion in A.D. 70. A triumphal procession would enter the Forum through this elegantly placed arch and parade up to the Temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill. Trée

Roman temples, imitating those of the Greeks, were supported by columns, usually in the Corinthian style, crowned with a bell-like acanthus flower. Their temples had large interiors and were often completely walled at the rear, because Romans performed their ceremonies indoors. They were the first to grasp the possibilities of using arches and vaults on a large scale, thus giving their buildings a vastness that the Greeks could not achieve.

**Large Buildings in Concrete** The Romans also invented concrete, which is inexpensive and can be laid by relatively unskilled labor. It can be shaped into forms impossible in marble, and it is lighter in weight and can easily be supported in vaulted buildings. One of its most successful applications is the spacious Pantheon—built in the time of Augustus and then rebuilt under Hadrian—covered by a dome with a striking opening in the center. Sculpture and architecture coincided in triumphal arches, which often bear reliefs depicting the historical event that the arch commemorates.

**Literature in the Empire: Virgil** In Rome, literature was generally the entertainment of the upper classes.

Augustus, the first emperor, favored several of the most famous Latin poets at his court. Perhaps the leading Latin poet was Virgil (70–19 B.C.). He borrowed from Greek models, as Roman poets often did. His early poems, the *Bucolics* (also called *Eclogues*) and *Georgics*, are polished hymns of praise to the Italian landscape that reflect the style of Theocritus and Hesiod; but the gentle, human spirit of Virgil himself is always present. The best qualities of Virgil appear when he treats civilized emotions—mercy, compassion, and sadness; then his work echoes with a graceful melancholy.

These qualities appear in his patriotic epic, the *Aeneid*, which adopts and transforms materials from Homer. In this work Virgil narrates the wanderings of Aeneas, the Trojan whose descendants were the legendary founders of Rome. Leaving his native city after the fall of Troy, Aeneas reached Carthage and had a romance with its queen, Dido; but his sense of duty compelled him to abandon her in order to reach Italy and fulfill his destiny. Virgil's aim was to sing the glory of Rome and its salvation by Augustus after the civil wars of the late Republic. Virgil knew Augustus, was a favorite at Augustus' court, and at times wrote what could be considered official propaganda.

**Satire: Horace, Juvenal** A contemporary of Virgil's was Horace, whose *Odes*, *Epodes*, and *Satires* examine love, amusement, annoyance, contentment—in short, the feelings of everyday life. He too was well connected with the court of Augustus. Now and then Horace makes an attempt at serious patriotic verse, but these poems are self-conscious and moralizing and do not speak with the real Horatian voice of gentle, amusing irony.

Juvenal, a more pungent satirist than Horace, wrote shortly after A.D. 100. He took as his motto "Indignation inspires my poetry" (*facit indignatio versum*). His poems denounce the excess of pride and elegance in Roman society. His language is colorful, often bitter and obscene. One of his richest and wisest satires concerns the vanity of human wishes. After reviewing the foolishness of human beings, Juvenal gives his advice in a famous epigram: One should pray for "a sound mind in a sound body" (*mens sana in corpore sano*).

**Poetry of Love** There was also a rich literature of sexuality. The poet Ovid (43 B.C.–A.D. 17) wrote a handbook for seduction, *The Art of Love*, and a treatise on love affairs. Perhaps because of his frankly sexual subject matter, Augustus exiled him to a distant town in the Black Sea region: a reminder that the peace and order under the Empire did not always guarantee personal freedom. The poet Propertius (ca. 47 B.C.–ca. 2 B.C.) and others also wrote of their mistresses; and the Greek satirist Lucian (ca. A.D. 120–ca. 185) has left a racy *Dialogue of the Courtesans*.

**Historians: Livy** The histories of Rome written during the Republic were usually the work of men directly involved in politics. Under the Empire this situation changed because political contest had almost vanished. It therefore seemed appropriate to look back on the Republic and write a final history of its politics and imperialism. Titus Livius, or Livy (59 B.C.–A.D. 17), undertook this task during the reign of Augustus, when the decisive political transformation occurred. Livy narrated Roman history from its legendary beginnings until 9 B.C. Because he usually drew on the work of earlier historians, he was sometimes unable to escape the influence of the myths that had clouded the history of the early Republic; thus he is at his best when he uses a good source such as the Greek historian Polybius.

Livy's *Roman History* is a kind of prose epic, filled with patriotism and admiration for the great men who had led Rome when the Republic was conquering the Mediterranean. He also suggests that Rome had declined in moral standards. Livy was the last writer in Latin to attempt a full history of Rome. His work inspired many later writers who looked back at the Republic as the Golden Age of Rome; it was accepted as authoritative until soon after 1800, when historians began to be more skeptical about Roman tradition.

**Tacitus** The leading Roman historian in intellectual stature was Publius Cornelius Tacitus (ca. 55–ca. 120). His first major work is *The Histories*, in which he treats Roman history from 69, the year of the four emperors, through the death of Domitian in 96, emphasizing the analysis of character. Deeply influenced by satire, the dominant literary form of his age, Tacitus loved to fashion stinging epigrams aimed at members of the governing class, and he treated nearly all his main characters as selfish or corrupt. His disillusioned attitude was partly the result of his being an outsider; probably from southern Gaul; he saw Roman society through the cool eyes of a man from a province who became a senator and even rose to the office of consul.

His most important work is the *Annals*, which covers the reign of the Julio-Claudian emperors from Tiberius through Nero. Tacitus looked back at the early Empire from the vantage point of a later period. Though he said he wrote "without anger or partisanship" (*sine ira et studio*),<sup>2</sup> he found little good to say about the first emperors, and few modern critics would call him impartial. At his best, Tacitus sets a high standard of accuracy, but his wish for accuracy was sometimes at war with his desire to send a moral message about the failings of this or that regime.

<sup>2</sup> *Annals*, 1.1.



The ancient Greek city Ephesus, on the coast of Turkey, remained prosperous in the Empire. Tiberius Julius Celsus, consul in A.D. 92, endowed this magnificent library, which his son completed about 135.

Comstock

## THE PERIOD OF CRISIS (192–284)

The Roman Empire, at its height, was in modern language the superpower of the Western world. There was no other state or system that could be called an empire, and certainly none that could challenge or threaten it. But in the third century of our era the Empire faltered and stumbled. The three unifying elements all appeared to be at the end of their strength. Emperors proved to be either weak or corrupt; the civil service was demoralized; and the army was broken up into factions that supported now one emperor, now another. The collapse of these three bulwarks of the state brought the economy crashing to ruin.

### *The Crisis of Leadership*

The centuries of the “Roman peace” ended with the death of the emperor Commodus in 192, and in the following years the political balance shifted to the military. The next generation faced an all but fatal military and political crisis. Wars broke out on the European frontiers, and most emperors could survive only a few years. During the third century, dozens of emperors claimed the throne, but many of these men were really no more than political gamblers or warlords who for a short time purchased the loyalty of their soldiers. Thus two of the stabilizing elements of the Empire—the strong, effective emperor and the disciplined army—began to fall apart.

The Roman Senate, which had once been the inspiration and bulwark of the state, now had neither interest nor ability to intervene in affairs of state, while the emperors assumed more and more dictatorial powers and governed through court favorites. The economy of

the Empire, too, nearly collapsed during this period, largely because defense costs had risen as raiders plundered the wealth of the Empire on several frontiers. Moreover, the emperors had been supplying the inhabitants of Rome with free food and public games, or “bread and circuses,” in the phrase of Juvenal the satirist—a fairly effective means of political domination, but a heavy drain on the economy. Adding to these financial problems was a shortage of silver, on which the imperial currency was based. The emperors resorted to debasing the currency, but this action forced people to hoard what silver they had and actually drove more of the metal out of circulation.

A further problem was the increasing reluctance of people of independent means to hold civic offices, which paid no salary. Moreover, office holders were forced to pay from their own pockets any deficiency in the collection of taxes. Finally, the government had to compel people to take office, a step that pointed to the practice of binding people to their occupations. This in turn led to the collapse of the third crucial element of stability in the state, the efficient administrators and civil servants. Many of the emperors during the century of crisis were men of little leadership; but some of them must have been among the ablest rulers in the history of Rome, for otherwise the Empire would have totally disintegrated.

### *Weaknesses in Roman Slavery*

**The Numbers of Slaves** Like most other ancient states, Rome used slaves widely. The historian’s duty is not simply to denounce this repugnant practice but to understand its place in Roman society. Ancient slavery, unlike slavery in America, never comprised members



of only one ethnic group. Anyone might have the bad luck to be rounded up, especially in war, and forced into slavery. During the late Republic, the number of Roman slaves increased dramatically, as Rome overran Greece, Asia Minor, Spain, and Gaul. Of the 7.5 million inhabitants of Italy at the death of Augustus, an estimated 3 million were slaves.

Slavery allowed an expansion of the great plantations of the last century of the Roman Republic. In most places they were more or less adequately fed. They had a better life in the cities, where they served as artisans and personal servants. Greeks in particular acted as tutors. Others supplied entertainment, especially girls and boys who could sing and dance. There was also traffic in beautiful young slaves of both sexes, often for sexual purposes. Gladiators were slaves and probably fought harder because of it. Victory over opponents might lead to freedom; if they lost, they forfeited little more than a miserable existence.

**Slavery and the Economy** Judged solely as an economic system, slavery allowed a calculated use of labor in relation to land and capital. But slavery had serious weaknesses, which we must include in the causes for the decline of the Empire in the West. Rome declined in part because the economy could no longer support the army against invaders. One principal reason for this weakness was that slavery could not solve two basic economic problems. First, there must be incentives to ensure an effective labor force. The possibility of being freed provided some incentive, but on the whole the plight of the slave was not to be envied. Especially on the land, the principal incentive for slaves was the dread of punishment. Their work required little skill and was almost entirely physical labor. This drained their work of dignity and dampened interest in technological innovation.

Second, demoralized slaves were poor producers of children, even when they were allowed to marry. Why pass misery down the generations? And conquests ceased from the time of Hadrian (117–138), a fact that threatened the continued supply of slaves.

### ***The Plight of the Poor***

The spread of great estates in the late Republic had driven many small farmers off the land. Many displaced workers drifted into Rome, where free bread and circuses purchased their docility. In provinces, too, rural depopulation and the abandonment of cultivated fields became a major problem for the economy. Faced with shrinking numbers of cultivators and taxpayers, the government sought desperately to resettle the abandoned fields. For example, Marcus Aurelius started a policy of settling foreigners on deserted lands within

the Empire. The state also sought to attract free Roman farmers back to the countryside. The free cultivator who settled on another's land was called a **colonus**, and this institution was called the *colonnate*.

**The Poor and the Land** Roman policy toward the *coloni* and other free cultivators was ambivalent and shifting. In many cases the *colonus* did well, with light and fixed rent that he paid to the landlord, or *dominus*. He could sell the land he improved or pass it on to his heirs, and he could depart from it at will. But by the fourth century the picture was much worse: The *colonus* was bound to the soil, as were his children after him, and he was subject to the personal jurisdiction of his lord. The long-term interests of society dictated that resettlement within family-owned farms should be encouraged. On the other hand, the hard-pressed government could not overlook any source of revenue, and it often resorted to outrageous fiscal practices. It ruthlessly requisitioned food; it forced settlers to pay the taxes of their absent neighbors; and it subjugated settlers to the authority of their landlords, who could be held responsible for collecting from them services and taxes. By the fourth and fifth centuries, under conditions of devastating fiscal oppression, some peasants preferred to flee the Empire rather than face ruin at home.

## THE LATE ROMAN EMPIRE

The crisis of the third century came close to a disaster that might have carried the Empire straight to its death. But some of the many emperors, both desperate and determined, managed to hold off invasions on the frontiers. The system designed by Augustus and maintained by his successors proved to have enough resources to weather the storm. As the Empire regained stability, it could not return to the old system in which the Senate provided a measure of guidance and controlled and distributed efficient governors. The only promise for the future lay in a strict vertical system. Meanwhile, in the world of faith the old Roman deities commanded less and less devotion, and a change of gods could not be halted or reversed.

### ***Restoration under Diocletian***

**The Rule of Diocletian (r. 284–305)** The political crisis of the third century finally ended in 284 when Diocletian, a high army officer, seized the imperial throne. He was from the peasantry of Illyria and was a strong, ruthless man who ruled through an authoritarian bureaucracy. Recognizing that the Empire was too large and too unstable to be directed by one man, Diocletian



The Tetrarchs (Diocletian and his corulers), shown supporting each other, on a corner of St. Mark's cathedral in Venice: Diocletian and Maximian are on the right; Galerius and Constantius on the left. The heads on the swords are Germanic.

Michael Holford Photographs

enlisted three associates to assist him in ruling. The two senior men (Diocletian and Maximian) bore the title Augustus; the two younger (Galerius and Constantius) were known as Caesar. Modern historians call this arrangement the **Tetrarchy** (rule of four). Each of the four rulers was placed wherever he was needed.

In order to solve the financial crisis, Diocletian had every plot of land taxed at a certain amount, to be paid to the emperor's agents. Trades and professions were also taxed so that the burden would not fall solely on landowners. The cities in the Empire had long had a local council or **curia**; the officials, called **curiales**, were personally responsible for the required tax and had to pay it themselves if they could not collect it from others. Diocletian tried to hold back inflation with a famous Edict on Prices, which fixed maximum prices for nearly all goods and also fixed maximum wages. But

natural economic forces led to further inflation, and he had to let the edict lapse after a few years.

Diocletian's severe rule stabilized the Empire, though it is hard to find in it much to praise. Many of his practices continued throughout the fourth century, especially his establishment of a despotism that resembled the ancient kingdoms of the Near East in its absolute monarchic rule. All laws came directly from the emperor, and the jurists, who had shaped the growth of law in the first two centuries of the Empire, played no further role. Thus Rome had moved from a "principate," the system of Augustus, to a "dominate" (*dominus*, "master").

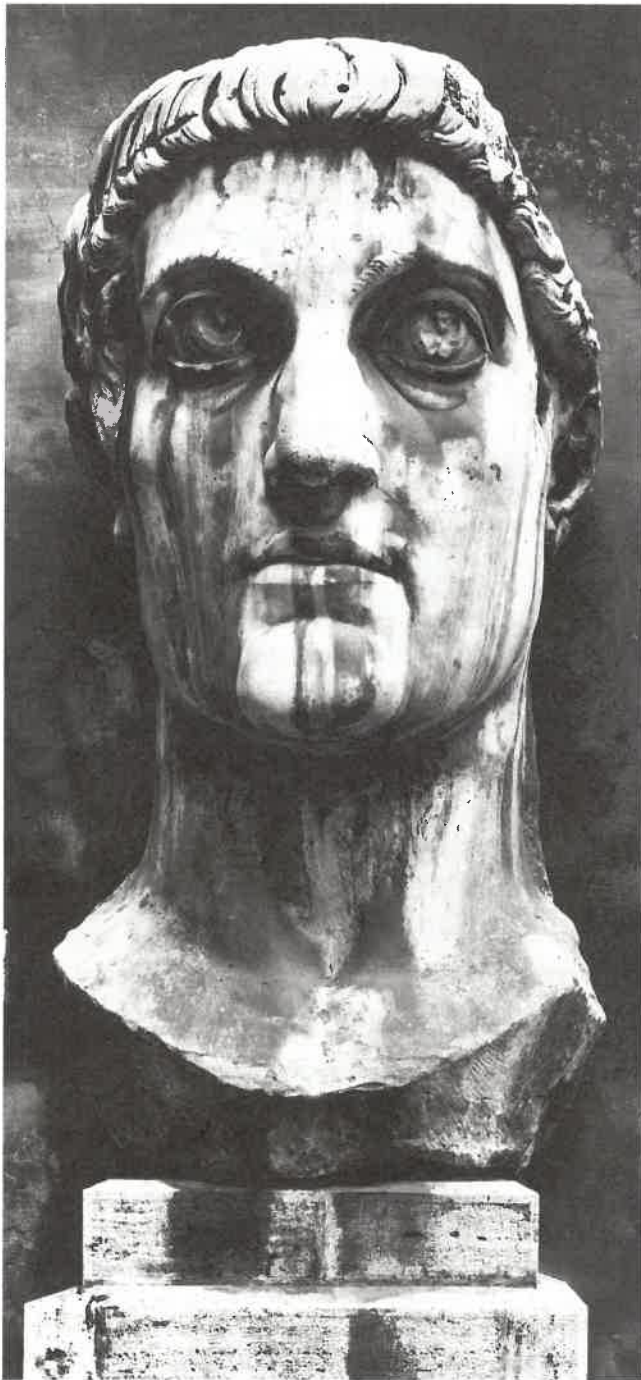
**The Accession of Constantine** Diocletian retired in 305, and soon afterward his system of shared rule broke down. Years of complex intrigue and civil war followed, as several leaders fought for the throne. One of the ruling circle was Constantius, the father of Constantine. When Constantius died in 306, Constantine began to fight for supreme power; in 324 he defeated his last rival and became sole emperor of Rome. Thus, forty years after the accession of Diocletian, the Empire once again had a single ruler. In 330 Constantine renamed the old Greek city of Byzantium as New Rome and established it as his capital; popular usage gave it the name Constantinople.

### **Constantine and the Bureaucracy**

By the end of his reign in 337, Constantine had set the pattern that remained throughout the fourth and later centuries. The whole state was now one rigid structure, almost one massive corporation that brutally discouraged individual initiative. A totally impassable gulf existed between the monarch's court and the common people. Even within the court, the emperor stood apart from the rest, surrounded by ceremony. Fourth-century rulers wore expensive cloaks dyed in purple, and courtiers had to kiss a corner of the emperor's robe when approaching the throne. Diadems, the custom of kneeling before the emperor, and other marks of royalty became traditional and have remained so in European monarchies.

### **The Decline of the Western Empire**

After Constantine's death in 337, the chief administrative question for more than a century was whether one man could be strong enough to rule as sole monarch. For most of the time, this solution proved impossible, and some kind of shared rule became common. On the death of Theodosius in 395, the Empire split into an Eastern half and a Western half, with the dividing line just east of Italy.



The emperor Constantine tried to increase his glory by commissioning colossal portraits of himself, such as the one in Rome shown here. The original full-length statue was some forty feet tall.

Hirmer Fotoarchiv

In the last centuries of the Empire, society became more and more rigid; it did not, and perhaps could not, allow people to move freely from one class to another. As the central government weakened, local estates, usually called *villas*, became self-sufficient units with

hunting lands and workshops that supplied the goods that the local population needed; they therefore became the main economic and political units of the Western Empire. At the same time, trade was declining because of a shortage of new markets and the constant threat of invasions along the frontiers. Moreover, a shortage of labor caused fertile lands to lie fallow and mines to remain unexploited.

**The “Fall” of Rome?** Such was the background for the dramatic turning point in history that is the end of the Western Empire. The formal end of the Western Empire is traditionally dated to 476, when a Germanic warlord, Odoacer (sometimes called Odovacar), deposed the youth whom we call the last Western emperor, Romulus Augustulus, and the Senate resolved not to try to name any further Western emperors. To symbolize the end of the Western emperors, an embassy was sent to Constantinople to surrender the imperial insignia. Modern readers inevitably think of this event in the terminology imposed by the historical masterpiece of Edward Gibbon—that is, as the “decline and fall” of the Empire. But no political structure as large as the Roman Empire really falls like a tree in a forest without further influence or legacy. Moreover, some emperors in Constantinople, notably Justinian in the sixth century, saw themselves as the head of the whole traditional Empire, West and East, and tried to reunite the two geographic parts.

**The Survival of the Eastern Empire** Even though historians take care to speak of the transformation of the Empire rather than of its disappearance, there is no doubt that the Empire in the West did pass away, while the Eastern part, based on Constantinople and called by historians the Byzantine Empire, survived for nearly another thousand years. The problem is to explain why the Western regions could not maintain themselves under a continuous government while no similar dissolution threatened the Eastern portion of the Empire.

**Theories about the Fall** Some historians have been enticed into trying to state the one great cause for the fall of Rome—and this quest may be impossible. Gibbon, for example, blamed the destructive work of barbarism and religion. But to say that Rome declined because of invasions by Germans, Franks, and Goths only pushes the inquiry back one step: Why were these peoples able to defeat an Empire that had ruled the civilized world for centuries? And why did the Eastern part of the Empire not decline along with the Western?

Some historians suggest that the emperors unintentionally paved the way for the fall of Rome by exterminating possible political rivals in the upper class, thus weakening the group that could have supplied leaders



MAP 5.3 THE EASTERN AND WESTERN EMPIRES IN 395

By the time of the division of the Empire in 395, it was divided into several "Dioceses," corresponding roughly to the former provinces. Dacia, north of the Danube River, had been lost, but the name was retained in a Diocese south of the river. Where were the two major locations of Goths?

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ship for the state. Others have advanced an economic argument, saying that the Empire was bound to decline because it never really emerged from a domestic economy. But this economic theory is hardly convincing, for some societies—admittedly much less complex than the Empire—have existed for many centuries with no more than a domestic economy. If there had been no convulsions and strains in the Empire, the production of goods and food could have continued more or less unchanged. Other historians have proposed exhaustion of the soil and fluctuating cycles of rainfall and drought in order to explain Rome's economic depression, but there is little exact knowledge about the cycles of crops and weather conditions that would indubitably account for the fall of the Empire.

**A Crisis in Manpower** Still other historians have suggested that the weakness of the Western Empire was due to a shortage of manpower. This explanation does have some merit, because the Eastern cities appear to have been more populous than the Western ones, and

thus they had more strength and resilience. The numerical inferiority of the West became even more serious when the villas became self-sufficient units and there was no longer a centralized military system. It was much easier for outsiders to invade the Empire when they met haphazard resistance from local forces. As early as the third century, many Germanic captives and volunteers entered the army, which was scarcely "Roman" in any true sense. The Germanic troops felt little loyalty to Roman tradition and were unwilling to submit to severe discipline. Thus the army—the power base of the Augustan age—sank and pulled the Empire down with it. Also, the relocation of the capital to Constantinople moved the administrative center even farther from the Western provinces and probably accelerated the dissolution of the regions of Italy and Gaul.

**The Routes of Invasion** But the shortage of manpower was not the only factor in the weakening of the Western Empire. Possibly an even stronger threat was simply the physical geography of Europe. The Western

## CHRONOLOGY

*The "Fall" of Rome*

476 is known to all readers of history as the year of the fall of Rome, but the true chronology is more complex.

393	Theodosius I, ruling in Constantinople, installs his son Honorius as emperor in the West.	476	The German warlord Odoacer leads a rebellion against Orestes and kills him, August 28. He deposes Romulus in Ravenna (September 4) and exiles him with a pension to Campania. The Roman Senate sends an embassy to Zeno, the Eastern emperor (r. 474–491), proclaiming no further need for a Western emperor; but Zeno continues to recognize Nepos.
395	Death of Theodosius; the division of the Empire into Eastern and Western parts is maintained.		
423	Death of Honorius in West; other Western emperors continue to be appointed.		
474, June 24	Leo I, emperor in East, appoints Julius Nepos as emperor in West.	480, April or May	Nepos is murdered in his villa at Salona.
475	Nepos appoints Orestes, a former lieutenant of Attila the Hun, as Master of the Soldiers. Orestes insists that his young son, Romulus Augustus (or Augustulus), be recognized as Western emperor. Nepos flees to Salona in Dalmatia. Romulus is proclaimed emperor in Ravenna on October 31, but the act is without legal force, and Nepos continues to be recognized as official Western emperor.	ca. 520	Marcellinus, in his Latin <i>Chronicle</i> written in Constantinople, states that the Western Empire ( <i>Hesperium imperium</i> ) "perished" with the deposition of Romulus Augustulus in 476, thus establishing this date for the "fall" of Rome.

Empire seems to have been far more vulnerable to invasion than the Eastern Empire. Warlike peoples streamed along the Danube valley and through the terrain of Central Europe into the Western provinces, which offered a less hazardous route than the journey south through the difficult mountains of the Balkans, Greece, and Asia Minor into the Eastern Empire.

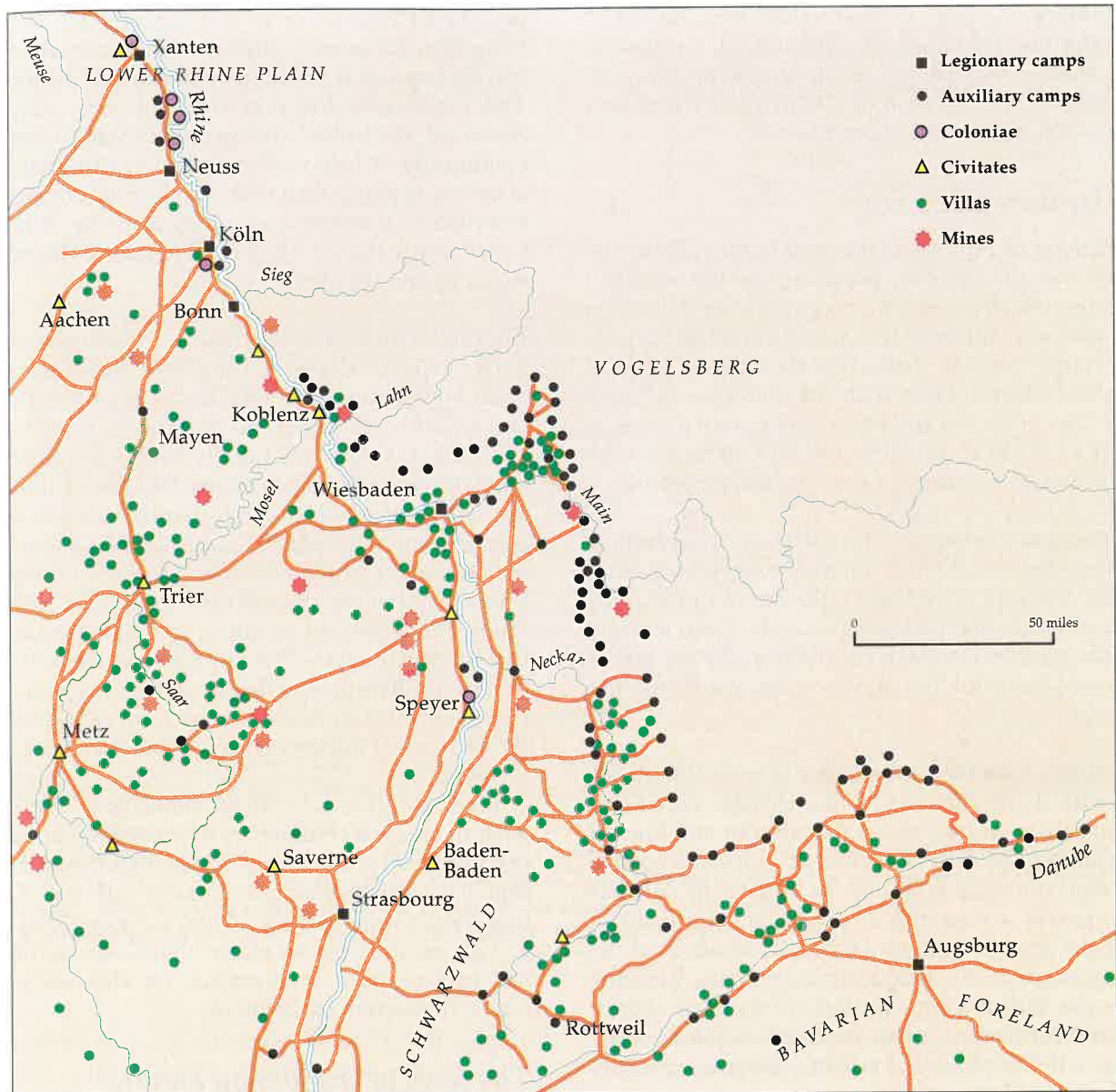
**Social Conditions and Decline** Other conditions, too, made the Western Empire less able to resist invasion. In the late second and third centuries the emperors had deliberately increased the prestige of the army and depressed the Senate and the civil service. The creature that they fashioned soon began to rule them, for the armies and their leaders made and unmade emperors at will. The only way to preserve civilian control over the military machine would have been to entrust more responsibility to the Senate and to maintain strong civil servants. But the emperors simply continued along the path of absolute coercion, stifling initiative and making the lower classes apathetic and resentful. These conditions gave citizens only slight motivation to defend their oppressive government; domination by invaders may have seemed not much worse than being in the grip of the Roman state.

We must also consider the large number of holidays and many forms of amusement within the city of

Rome: To what degree did such luxuries contribute to the transformation of the Western Empire? There is evidence here and there that the masses in the city gradually lost their feelings of responsibility. For example, in 69, as Tacitus reports, the crowd cheered with pleasure as rival troops fought in the streets for the throne. When the masses no longer had to exert more than minimal effort to survive, they abandoned the discipline and civic cooperation that had created the Empire. The people shunned public office, non-Italians supplied the troops, and appeals for traditional Roman firmness in danger found little response.

**The Role of Christianity** Finally, historians must take into account the great upheaval in ideas and faith. We cannot express this view in the language of science or statistics, but the new religion, Christianity, may also have weakened the defenses of the Empire. This thesis was first supported by Edward Gibbon, who had rejected the Catholic faith in his own life and scorned Christianity. But even as we recognize Gibbon's prejudices, we must allow that he may have hit a part of the truth. In the Roman scheme, the emperors, governors, and administrators stood far above the people, and Roman religion pro-

<sup>3</sup> *Histories*, 3.83.



**MAP 5.4 THE RHINE FRONTIER OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE**

This map shows the fortifications that ran largely east of the Rhine and north of the Danube rivers. Their purpose was defense against Germanic tribes. Legions of Roman soldiers were stationed at larger centers (Bonn, Köln or Cologne, Strasbourg or Strassburg), and at a lower level there were many camps of auxiliary troops, all connected by a system of roads. Which legionary camp was located south of the Danube River?

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vided little spiritual compensation for a low rank in the world. The Christian faith offered something better: the message that all persons are potentially equal in the eyes of God and may hope for a better afterlife through salvation. As the Western Empire came under constant attack, the increasing number of Christians may have been less than eager to fight to preserve the old system. This spiritual rejection, as we might call it, worked along with the mighty pressures of invasion to cause the “fall” of Rome.

## CHRISTIANITY AND ITS EARLY RIVALS

The triumph of Christianity within the Roman Empire was one of the most remarkable cultural revolutions in history—all the more extraordinary because its values were opposed to those of classical thought, which sought the good life in the present world. *Carpe diem*, “Seize the day,” said Horace; there is no certainty

about tomorrow. But classical values were failing to reach the disadvantaged, the subjugated, the losers. Small wonder that people sought a new meaning for their existence. More than this, Christianity was born into a world alive with religious fervor.

### ***The Mystery Religions***

One element of a spreading religious ferment under the Empire was the growing popularity of the so-called mysteries, which promised a blessed life after death to those who were initiated into secret (therefore “mysterious”) rites. Through these rites, the believer attained a mystical identification with the renewing cycles of nature. The mysteries are generally described in various sources as thrilling, bringing one into another world, carrying one to a summit of emotion and perception.

***The Mysteries of Eleusis*** The oldest and most famous rites were held each fall at Eleusis, a day’s walk from Athens. A drama-filled night culminated in the initiate’s conviction that he or she would be given a lovely life after death by Demeter, the goddess of grain, just as she caused beautiful new grain to come forth from the apparently dead seed.

***Mithraism*** This hope for survival after death did not bring with it any expectation of a changed moral life, nor did initiation lead to membership in any kind of community of believers or “church,” with one notable exception: the religion known as Mithraism. Mithras was originally a Persian god of light and truth and an ally of the good god, Ahura Mazda; he symbolized the daily triumph of life over death by bringing back the sun to the dark heavens. Initiation was open only to men, and Mithraism—with its emphasis on courage, loyalty, self-discipline, and victory—became especially popular in the Roman army.

***Christianity and Mysteries*** When Christians began, around A.D. 30, to proclaim the good news (or “gospel”) of the recent death and resurrection of their leader, Jesus of Nazareth,<sup>4</sup> throughout the Empire, many who responded thought they were hearing about the best “mystery” of all: A historical person had conquered death and promised a blessed afterlife to all who believed in him. Yet much early Christian literature was written to teach believers that Christianity was far more than a “mystery.” In fact, the historian should

<sup>4</sup> “Jesus” was his name. After his death he was called *ho Christós*, “the anointed one,” or the Messiah, by his followers. Thus the names “Christ” and “Jesus Christ,” though universally used, are not historically accurate, and “Jesus, called the Christ” is cumbersome.

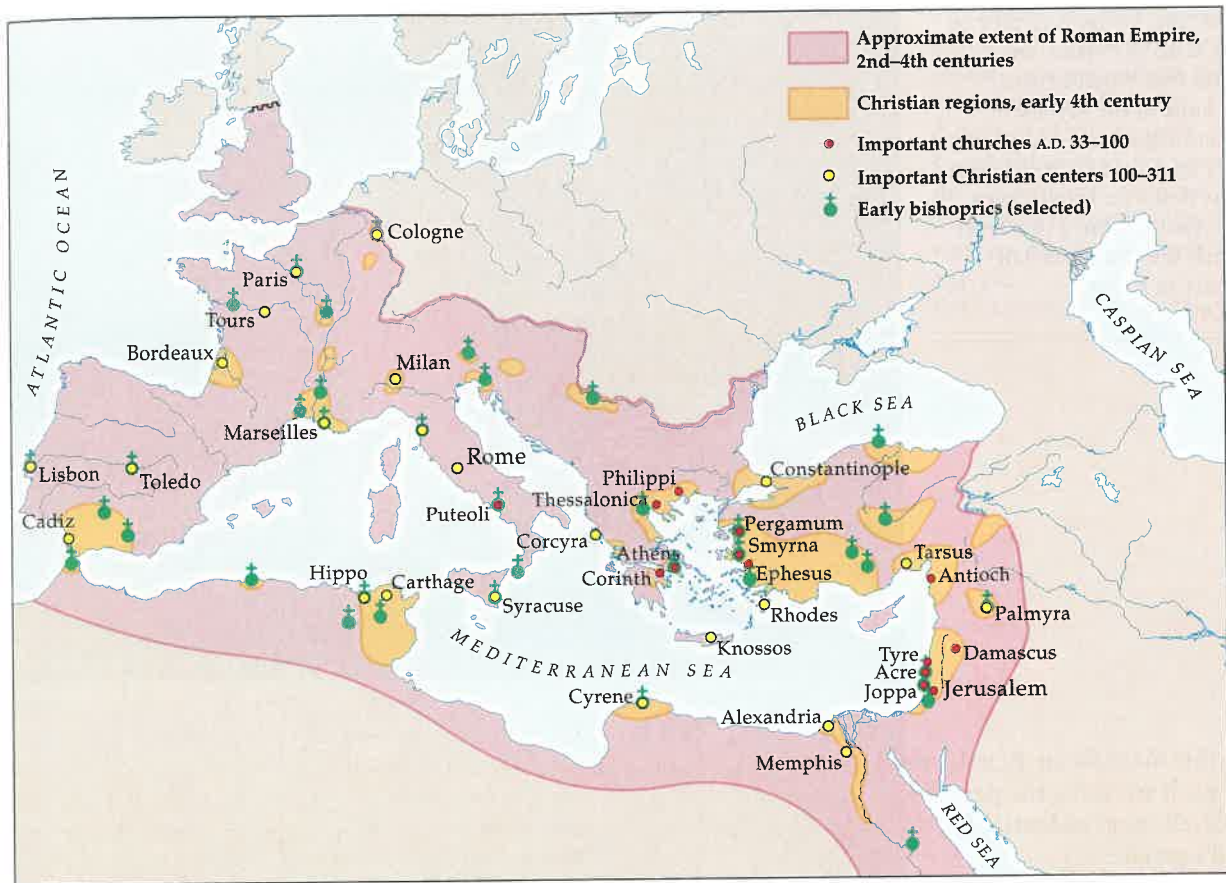
not class Christianity among the mystery religions. First, rites in mystery religions were secret, and participation required a period of instruction or purification. The experience, however thrilling, was temporary. Above all, the rituals usually did not lead to forming a community of believers or a church. Christianity, in contrast, demanded that every believer practice love and justice in new communities made up of Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, rich and poor, educated and ignorant.

***Characteristics of Christianity*** This new religion hardly looked “religious.” Christians had no temples or other holy places, no priests, no ordinary sacrifices, no oracles, no visible gods, no initiations; they made no pilgrimages, did not practice divination, would not venerate the emperor, and challenged the final authority of the father (or oldest male) in family life. No wonder some pagans accused Christians of being atheists who undermined traditional society. The roots of these radical beliefs and practices go back to the long Judaic tradition and its sacred writings. Christians maintained that prophecies in the Hebrew Bible, which in the light of new revelation they began to call the *Old Testament*, had foretold the coming of Jesus as the Messiah, the deliverer of the Jewish people, and the future lord of the world.

Like the Jews, Christians emphasized their goal was to wish to create a community of men and women who practiced justice and mercy. All the first Christians had been Jews, but they parted company with Jewish tradition by insisting that Jesus’ life, his sacrificial death, and his resurrection all meant that God’s community had become open to everyone, on absolutely equal terms, from every background.

### ***The Jews in the Roman Empire***

***The Jews and Other Powers*** The Jews had been favored subjects of the Persian Empire until Alexander’s invasion of the East (334–323 B.C.) swept away Persian rule. In the Hellenistic Age they were governed during the third century B.C. by the Ptolemies of Egypt and then by the Seleucid kings of Syria, who began to force Greek culture on them and finally outlawed the Jewish religion altogether. One Seleucid king, Antiochus I (r. 175–164 B.C.), defiled the holy Temple in Jerusalem by erecting within it an altar to Zeus and an image of himself. Pious Jewish nationalists responded under the leadership of Judas Maccabaeus with guerrilla warfare. This successful Maccabean Revolt (167–164 B.C.) is remembered today with Hanukkah, the eight-day Festival of Lights, which celebrates the reported miracle of a one-day supply of oil that burned for eight days. After a century of virtual independence, the Jews in Judea



MAP 5.5 THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY

This map shows the successive stages of the spread of Christianity. Note that there were some important churches within the first century A.D. in the eastern Mediterranean. Later, churches appeared on the very edges of the Roman Empire. What were the northernmost and southernmost bishoprics in the period of the Empire?

◆ For an online version, go to [www.mhhe.com/chambers9](http://www.mhhe.com/chambers9) > chapter 5 > book maps

(the province created out of the Jewish kingdom of Judah) fell under Rome's control after the arrival in Jerusalem of the Roman general Pompey in 63 B.C.

When Julius Caesar was at war with Pompey in 47 B.C., he had the help of a Jewish force, and he rewarded the Jews with reduced taxes and exemption from military service. The Romans also agreed that Jews could not be called to court on the Sabbath and that they could continue to worship in their synagogues, even in Rome itself. Thus, despite the loss of their century-long freedom, the Jews enjoyed at least some measure of toleration.

**Roman Control over the Jews** Rome permitted client kings, local rulers who pledged loyalty to Rome, to rule Judea. The most notorious was Herod the Great (r. 40–4 B.C.), hated by most Jews, whom he sought to win over by remodeling the Temple in Jerusalem into one of the wonders of the ancient world. But Herod's son was a weak ruler, and the Romans assumed direct control over Judea through civil servants from Rome; they

were usually called procurators, the most famous of whom was Pontius Pilate.

Constant quarrels between the Roman officers and the Jews reached a climax in A.D. 66, when Jerusalem burst into rebellion. This great Jewish War, as the Romans called it, lasted until 70, when the Romans under the emperor Titus demolished the Temple, except a remnant of the Western Wall, at which Jews were allowed to pray once a year. This portion of wall still stands and is a holy shrine to Jews today. Hoping to retain the favor of the Jews by respecting their god, the Romans did not at first try to eliminate the Jewish faith itself; but they finally did attempt its suppression after another Jewish rebellion (131–135). Nonetheless, Judaism retained its coherence and strength, assuring its people that God would one day send them their redeemer.

**Jewish Factions** The attractiveness of Hellenistic culture, combined with the insult of Roman occupation, led to a continuing crisis of identity among the Jews.



**MITHRAEUM, OR SHRINE TO THE SAVIOR GOD MITHRAS, WITH BENCHES FOR WORSHIPERS.**

It was built in the second or third century within a large first-century apartment. On the altar, Mithras is shown sacrificing a bull to Apollo. Above this level was built the church of San Clemente in Rome.

C. M. Dixon



After the Maccabean Revolt, three principal factions arose, each stressing the part of Jewish tradition that it considered most essential for the survival of the Jews as God's people.

First, the landed aristocracy and high priests formed the **Sadducees**, religious conservatives who rejected belief in an afterlife and in angels because they did not find such teaching in the five Books of Moses (the Pentateuch, called the *Torah* by Jews).

A second faction, the **Pharisees**, were pious middle-class laypersons who taught the resurrection of the dead, believed in angels, and accepted gentile converts.<sup>5</sup> During the century following the Roman expulsion of the Jews from Jerusalem in 135, the spiritual heirs of the Pharisees, the great rabbis, organized their oral legal traditions, which updated the practice of the *Torah*, into a book called the *Mishnah*. This compendium became fundamental for all subsequent Jewish thought and was augmented in the East by an authoritative commentary (the *Gemara*) to form the Babylonian **Talmud**, or general body of Jewish tradition. A similar process in the West created the less elaborate Persian Talmud.

**The Essenes** The third faction was the Essenes, who have drawn the most attention in recent years because of the astonishing discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, documents found from 1947 onward in eleven caves near the Dead Sea. Although scholarly debate contin-

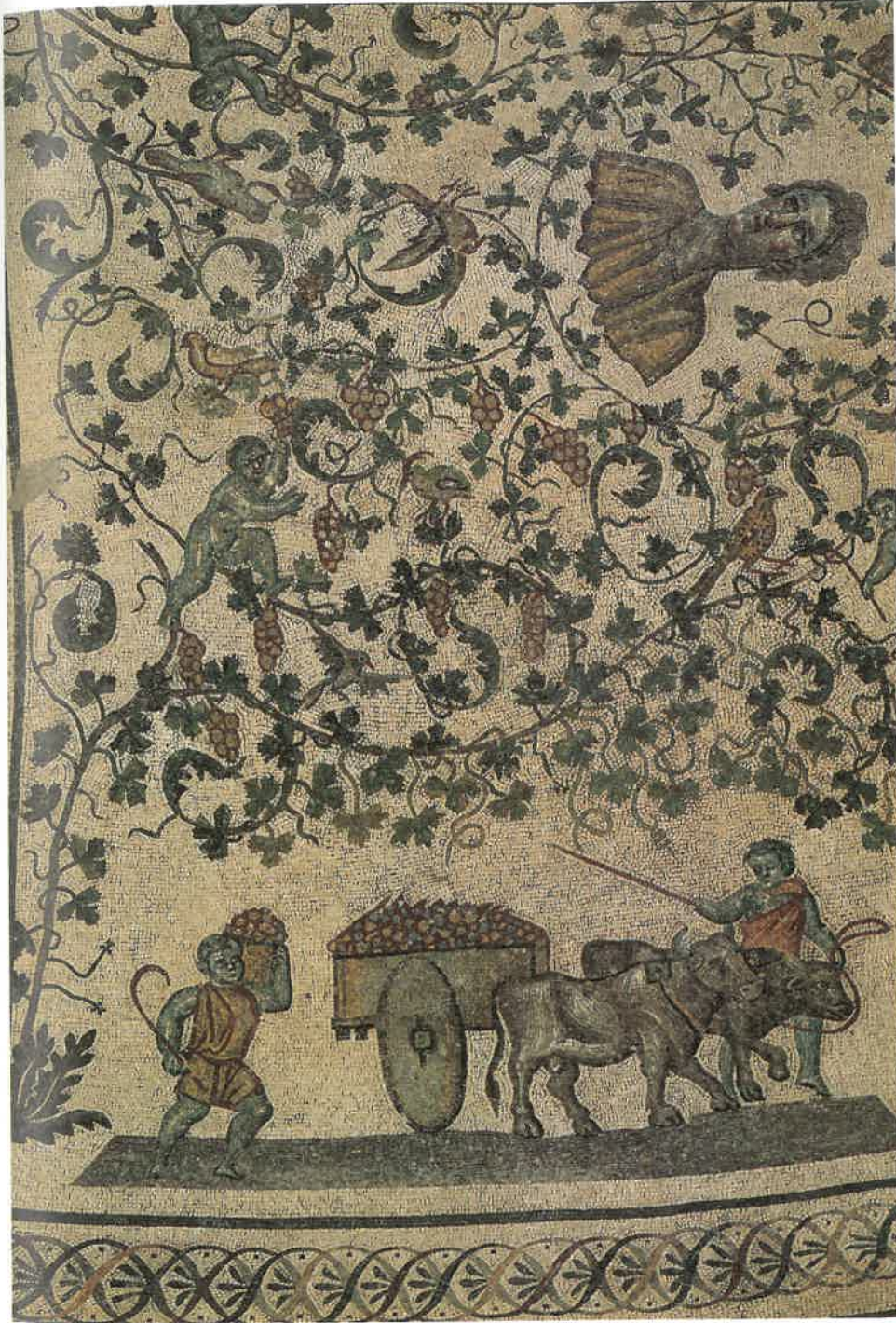
<sup>5</sup> The Latin word *gentiles* means "foreigners," those born to non-Jewish mothers.

ues, the consensus is that the writers were Essenes, ascetic priests who settled at Qumran, fifteen miles into the desert east of Jerusalem, after the Maccabean Revolt; they were evidently protesting against the leadership of the Temple by high priests whom they considered corrupt and unworthy.

These rolls and many fragments of leather have given historians an extraordinary view of the apocalyptic beliefs and strict practices of this protesting faction, which was active from ca. 150 B.C. to A.D. 70. The Essenes were convinced that evil in the world had become so powerful—even prevailing in the Temple—that only a cataclysmic intervention by God, which would soon arrive, could cleanse the world and open the way for righteousness to prevail.

**Doctrines of the Essenes** A certain "Teacher of Righteousness," the priestly champion of the forces of light, is thought to be the anonymous author of many of the scrolls; his opponent in Jerusalem, who he says serves the powers of darkness, is called the Wicked Priest. The scrolls foresee at least two God-anointed leaders: the Messiah of David (a military commander) and the Messiah of Aaron (a high priest). The writers also predict the return of the "Teacher."

The relations of the Essenes at Qumran to Jesus and the first Christians remain much debated. The Essenes never appear in the Christian Bible, or New Testament. To be sure, in the spectrum of Jewish factions, these two groups could hardly have differed more widely. The Essenes were exclusive, hierarchic, priestly, and withdrawn from society. Jesus and his followers wel-



The church of Santa Costanza in Rome, built in the early fourth century as a mausoleum for Constantia and Helena, daughters of the emperor Constantine, contains some of the oldest Christian mosaics. This scene from daily life shows workers bringing in the grape harvest.

Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

comed everyone; they were egalitarian, uninterested in sacrifices in the Temple, and wholly "in the world."

### *Origins of Christianity*

**The Person of Jesus** The modern historical investigation of Jesus of Nazareth has challenged scholars for two centuries. He seems to have been a charismatic Jewish teacher, yet he wrote nothing that we know of.

His existence and his execution by the Romans are confirmed by such first- and second-century historians as Josephus, Tacitus, and Suetonius.

For details we must sift the writings of early converts, such as Saul of Tarsus (who did not know Jesus) or the authors of the Gospels (the first four books of the New Testament), which focus on Jesus' power over evil forces, his message of hope and moral demands, his healing miracles, and his radical inclusiveness (even

lepers were welcomed into the faith). But ancient writers had little interest in presenting his biography in chronological order or in probing his inner life. We know almost nothing about his career as a youth and young adult apart from his being raised a Jew in Galilee; thus, despite the efforts of many, it is impossible to write a biography of Jesus.

**Jesus as Teacher** As his followers recalled his career, Jesus was born of a virgin named Mary, who was betrothed but not yet married to a man named Joseph, in the last years of Herod the Great, at a date that modern scholarship sets about 4 B.C. At around age thirty, Jesus went to John the Baptist, an outspoken prophet, to be baptized—that is, to become purified through a ritual washing—and join his apocalyptic movement, which foresaw the coming end of the world. Soon afterward John was imprisoned, and Jesus began a program of itinerant teaching and healing, apparently rejecting John's apocalyptic message by proclaiming instead the "good news" that God's rule had already begun *before* the final judgment. Jesus affirmed the Pharisees' belief in resurrection, yet he urged his disciples to pray that God's will be done here on earth as it is in heaven, that God's kingdom should come to people here. Jesus was, therefore, a man in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, who brought their message to the people directly.

In the Sermon on the Mount, the summary of Jesus' basic principles recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus declared that when God rules, the poor, the meek, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the justice seekers will be honored. He said too that prayer and piety were matters of personal commitment, not public gestures to win society's acclaim.

**Doctrines of Jesus** With all other Jews, Jesus believed that God was a gracious, welcoming God. The related questions were: To *whom* is God gracious? and, therefore, Whom must I treat as my neighbor? As Jesus demonstrated by his fellowship at open meals, every person was potentially such a neighbor, especially a person in need.

Jesus' fellowship at meals reached its climax at his last supper at the time of Passover, a Jewish religious holiday. At this meal he urged his disciples to continue a ritual practice in memory of him, using bread and wine to symbolize the gift of his body and the sacrifice of his blood. The early Christians regularly did so, calling this meal the eucharist, or thanksgiving. Jesus' doctrines included the assurance that belief in his message would bring redemption from sin and salvation with eternal life in the presence of God; above all, he called himself the Son of Man—but also the Son of God, who would sit at God's right hand.

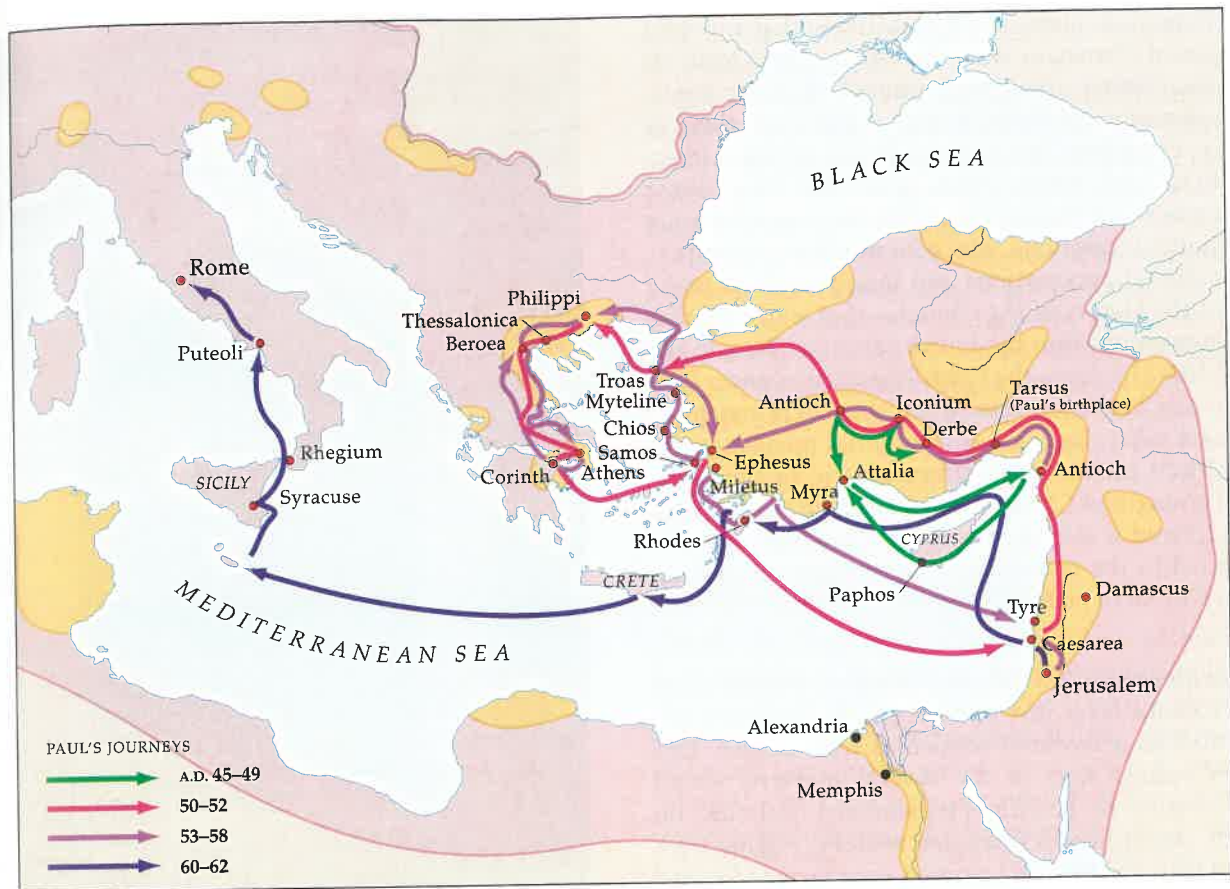
**Jesus' Death** For the passing of Jesus, only Christian sources give us a narrative, which we cannot compare with others. Christian writers state that the high priests in Jerusalem accused Jesus of blasphemy (he had challenged their authority in the Temple), of pretending to be God's Messiah and a king, and of opposing paying taxes to the Roman emperor. The Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, apparently feared that a riot, led by Jesus' enemies, was about to break out at the Passover. It is said that he washed his hands to make himself innocent of Jesus' blood and handed him over to a hostile crowd, which then brought about his crucifixion, a horribly painful form of execution (about A.D. 30).

Jesus' followers became convinced that God raised him from the dead after three days and that this resurrection confirmed the truth of his deeds and words despite his rejection and persecution. The Christians further believed that he ascended bodily into heaven but would return to save his followers and establish his kingdom. Armed with this conviction, they followed the example of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and began to convert other Jews to their faith.

**Paul and His Mission** A Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus (in today's southern Turkey), known to us as Paul, became a leader in persecuting Jews who had become Christians. Luke, the author of one of the four Gospels, narrates Paul's life in the *Acts of the Apostles*. About A.D. 33, on his way to Damascus to organize further persecution, Paul saw on the road an apparition of the risen Jesus, who asked, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Paul realized that he had been given a special mission to the gentiles and became Christianity's chief advocate. He traversed the Roman world, organizing Christian communities of both Jews and gentiles and advising their members through his letters. He was executed in Rome about A.D. 62 while planning a mission to Spain (see map 5.6).

Paul became the best known of all the early Christian teachers. His letters, or epistles, written to guide the congregations he had founded, were widely circulated and then collected as part of the Christians' inspired Scriptures. Luke devotes nearly half of the *Acts* to Paul's career as a courageous witness who fought with burning missionary fever for his new lord.

**Paul and the Conversion of the Gentiles** Above all, Paul rejected the policy of some early Jewish Christians who wanted to restrict membership in the new faith to Jews or to gentiles who had become Jews through circumcision. In one of his tautly argued letters in the Bible's Book of Romans he asked: "Is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also." By rejecting circumcision as a condition of membership, Paul helped firmly establish the Christian church on the basis of personal faith.



MAP 5.6 THE JOURNEYS OF ST. PAUL

The journeys of St. Paul over 17 years, as he visited and wrote to Christians everywhere, were tireless and complex. In his last two years he reached Rome, where he died. Where did he first concentrate his efforts?

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not limited by ethnic identity, bloodlines, or observation of the Mosaic law.

**Paul and Christian Communities** Paul taught Christians to regard themselves as citizens of heaven and to begin living with one another in humility and love, in joyous expectation of their final destiny. Christians were sure that God would soon consign their world's system of honor and shame based on violence, pride, and class discrimination to the trash heap of history. Paul also redefined the notion of the Messiah. For Jews, this leader would someday arrive and create another kingdom on earth. For Paul, the messianic age had begun with Jesus, interrupting the age of violence and death as the sign and promise of what the future would bring.

Paul's vision of human freedom and a renewed human community characterized by mutual service is one of the most compelling social images in Western culture. Taking this message throughout the lands of the eastern Mediterranean, Paul and his successors brought converts by the thousands into the new church.

**Persecutions** The Roman government adopted a general policy of toleration toward the many religious sects of the Empire, seeking the blessings of all divine powers on the Empire. The Romans even paid for sacrifices to be performed on behalf of the Empire in the temple in Jerusalem. They asked only that veneration be shown on official occasions to the traditional gods and to the deceased and deified emperors—little more than public patriotism. But the Christians, like the Jews before them, refused even this apparently small compromise with polytheism.

Rome's attitude toward Christians wavered between lack of interest and cruel persecution. The first serious persecution took place under Nero in A.D. 64. A vast fire had ravaged the crowded areas in central Rome, and Nero had many Christians brutally killed as scapegoats. The historian Tacitus, in reporting the affair, declares that Christians were thought guilty of a wicked style of life, but he makes it clear that the persecution was based on a false charge.<sup>6</sup> From time to time other anti-Christ-

<sup>6</sup> *Annals*, 15.44.

ian actions took place, but it is unlikely that the mild doctrines of Christians were the reason. Their main offense was, rather, their stubbornness, or *contumacia*, which caused many in the Roman world to see them as enemies of society. The emperor Trajan, giving instructions to his civil servant Pliny, agreed that laws against Christians should be followed, but he warned against anonymous accusations, which he would not tolerate.

Occasional persecutions and long periods of peace marked the history of the Church—that is, the Christian community—into the fourth century. Then, in the period 303–313, came the Great Persecution under Diocletian and his successors, when the rulers sought to eliminate what they saw as a potential menace to the state. Their unsuccessful efforts testify to the widespread strength of Christianity. Moreover, the persecutions created a list of venerated Christian martyrs, which led to the cult of saints, thereafter an integral part of Christian piety.

**Female Martyrs** In Christian thought, women could receive God's favor just as men could. Therefore Roman officials persecuted women as well as men. Our sources (called Acts of the several martyrs) record many stories of horrific punishments inflicted on women. According to Christian sources, virgins were thrown into brothels and women were fastened naked to trees by one foot and left to perish as they hung downward. One woman of Alexandria boldly refused to abandon her faith and is said to have been tortured to death by having boiling pitch poured over her body.

A famous martyr was St. Perpetua, who was put to death in Carthage in 203. A narrative in Latin records her fate. The emperor Septimius Severus had forbidden any subjects to become Christians, but Perpetua and five others fearlessly confessed their Christianity. Her mother was a Christian, but her father was a pagan. In vain he begged her to renounce her faith in order to spare his family the disgrace of having a Christian daughter. She was tried before a procurator, who also urged her to recant, but she refused the customary sacrifice for the emperor. Perpetua and her slave, who became St. Felicitas, welcomed their martyrdom; they and their fellow Christians were mauled by wild animals before being killed by the sword.

**St. Agnes and St. Cecilia** The narratives of the martyrs are meant to show the steadfast courage of early Christians and the solace they found in their faith. Christian sources preserve, for example, the story of St. Agnes, in the time of Diocletian. She was exposed in the stadium of Domitian in Rome (now the Piazza Navona, where a church stands bearing her name), but her nakedness was covered by the miraculous growth



The fourth-century emperor Valentinian I shown as Christian ruler in a colossal statue from Barletta in southeast Italy. In one hand, he holds an orb (restored) to signify his imperial power; in the other, the cross to show his devotion to the Church. The portrait thus unites the two forces that sustained the later Empire.

Scala/Art Resource, NY

of her hair. She was then tied to a stake to be burned, but the flames would not touch her and the emperor had her beheaded.

Again, St. Cecilia, the purported inventor of the organ and the patron saint of music, was according to tradition imprisoned in her own bath to be scalded. She emerged unscathed and was then beheaded (the date of her death is uncertain). A church to her memory stands on the spot of her house in Rome, where she lived with her husband, whom she converted.

**An Emperor Becomes the Church's Patron** One of the most amazing changes of face in Roman history is the radical shift in the policy of the government toward

the Christians initiated in 313 by the emperor Constantine. In the traditional story, first appearing around the period 318–320, Constantine had a dream on the evening before he was to fight a rival for supremacy over Italy in 312, at the Milvian Bridge near Rome. In the dream he was told to decorate the shields of his soldiers with the Greek letters *chi* and *rho*, the monogram of Christ: “In this sign you shall conquer.” Constantine won the battle and thereafter recognized divine power in the name of Christ.

At what point Constantine himself converted to Christianity is debated. In any case, in 313, at a conference held at Milan, he ended the age of persecutions by extending complete freedom of worship to the Christians and ordering the return of their confiscated goods. As to Constantine himself, his conversion had certain political reasons, for there were now so many Christians that he naturally wanted to include them within the state. But his own letters and actions show a serious personal commitment to Christianity.

***The Victory of Christianity*** Just before his death in 337, Constantine received baptism from the bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia, but Christianity was not yet the official religion of the Empire. The emperor Julian, known as the Apostate, turned his back on the church and tried in the period 361–363 to restore the position of the traditional gods, but by then the wave of Christianity could not be stopped. In 391 and 392 Theodosius the Great forbade the practice of all religions except the form of Christianity recognized by the government, thus transforming in one move the character of both the Empire and Christianity. He reversed Rome’s long-standing policy of religious toleration and changed the Church from a brave alternative society sharply critical of “this world” into a friend of worldly power; it thus began attracting some “converts” who sought personal gain rather than spiritual renewal.

***Christianity and Roman Law*** The law had been moving for many years toward more humane regulations, partly under the influence of philosophic conceptions of natural law that could apply to all persons. For example, the old supreme power of the father had long since fallen away. Christianity moved this spirit forward. Constantine and his successors gave more and more privileges to the church. Christians became exempt from the much-resented burdens of civil service in local curiae. Churches could own property and enjoyed exemptions from certain taxes, and bishops were allowed to judge the legal disputes of the members of their congregations. The clergy had the power to preside over the freeing of slaves by their owners, and freed slaves became citizens at once. Thus the Church acquired a privileged juridical status that it would re-

tain, in many Western lands, until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Constantine repealed the old laws of Augustus that regulated marriage and punished celibacy—a lifestyle now tolerated more easily because celibacy in priests was seen as a virtue. Emperors tried, though without great success, to discourage the ease with which people could be divorced (St. Jerome writes of a man living with his twenty-first wife, a woman who had already had twenty-two husbands), and cases in divorce could be heard by priests. Women were given greater protection with regard to dowries; husbands had less power over a dowry during marriage, and it became easier for a wife to recover it after divorce (Hammurabi of Babylon had long ago seen to similar rights for women).

### ***Battles within Christianity***

Usually the Christian community did not bother to define matters of dogma or discipline until disputes threatened its internal unity. The losers in these disputes, if they did not amend their beliefs, were regarded as heretics (from the Greek word *hairesis*, meaning “choice”—that is, a wrong choice). This word was used from the earliest days of Christianity.

***The Heresies of Marcion and Montanus*** A heresy that threatened the character of the Christian revelation was that of Marcion of Sinope in Asia Minor (ca. 150). He sought to reform Christianity by restricting it to the message of St. Paul alone. He therefore edited his version of the New Testament, which included and recognized as divine only the Gospel of Luke and the Epistles of Paul.

Another heresy was that of a bishop from Asia Minor, Montanus (ca. 170–200), who maintained that certain living believers were prophets who were continuously receiving direct inspiration from the Holy Spirit. Women were prominent among these prophets, and Montanus’ ideas eventually won the allegiance of the great North African writer Tertullian. The movement forced Christians to ask: Who should rule the Christian congregations—teachers, who could only interpret texts from the past, or living prophets, who might expect continuing new revelations?

***Christian Responses to Heresy*** Christians who accepted the standard doctrines of the Church branded the ideas of Marcion and Montanus as heresy. Because such heresies have vanished over the centuries, one might well ask: What is their historical importance? The answer is that they stimulated the early Church to redefine its positions. Out of the turmoil and disagreement, the Church emerged stronger, even though the

price was sometimes the blunt suppression of sincerely held opinions.

Orthodox theologians of the second century answered Marcion by defining the canon of sacred writings to include, in effect, the modern Bible—the entire Old and New Testaments. And the Church answered Montanus by declaring that the age of divine inspiration had come to an end. All the truths needed for salvation, the Church now said, were complete with the work of St. John, the last inspired author (ca. 100), and no new revelations were admitted. In the fourth century, too, the Church refused to accept as inspired certain other writings, calling them the Apocrypha (obscure or unclear writings).

**The Government of the Church** Evidence from the first century indicates that James, a relative (perhaps a brother) of Jesus, was the recognized head of the Christians in Jerusalem. During this period, too, we meet the terms deacon (*diakonos*), bishop (*episkopos*, or “overseer”), and elder (*presbuteros*), which at first were nearly synonymous. Then, in the second century, the bishop became the elected leader of a group of elders (later called priests) and of deacons (both men and women), who became responsible for collecting donations, distributing charities, and managing the Church’s material affairs.

Bishops gained the right to appoint priests, define doctrine, maintain discipline, and oversee morals. This political structure gave Christianity a stable administration and a hierarchy that no ancient mystery religion enjoyed. In the West, the number of bishops remained small; they thus obtained power over fairly large areas. Bishops in cities with the largest Christian communities—Rome, Alexandria, Antioch—became the most influential. Finally, the bishop of Rome became the head of the Church in the West. The general name for a bishop was *papa*, or father, but eventually the bishop of Rome was the only one who could so call himself (in English, *pope*).

**Women in the Church** The role of women in early Christianity presents some contradictions to the historian. The figure of Mary, mother of Jesus, was of course universally revered, and Gospel accounts associate other women with Jesus: Mary Magdalene and another Mary are said to have been the first to see Jesus risen from his tomb. Paul names one Junia in the Book of Romans as “outstanding among the apostles.” Other gifted women served as teachers and coworkers with Paul.

On the other hand, the Christian writer Tertullian says of women, “You give birth to suffering and anguish. You are Eve. The Devil is in you. You were the first to abandon God’s law. You were the one who de-



Mosaic of the Three Magi, kings or wise men, Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar in Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, sixth century A.D. Ravenna.

Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna/Dagli Orti (A)/The Art Archive

ceived man.” Such a stern condemnation of women reminds us of the much milder words of Paul commanding women to be silent in church: “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence” (1 Tim. 2).

**Widows and Virgins in the Church** But as the Church developed, it made more and more use of the devotion and abilities of women. Widows, for example, had always inspired compassion as people in need of help, and special honor was paid to widows who had led a chaste life and could show that they had done good works. Their duty was to pray at home but also to visit the sick and pray at their bedsides. But, in accordance with Paul’s words, they were not to teach the Gospel.

Later, in the third and fourth centuries, widows and virgins could become deaconesses and thus rise higher in status within the Church. Though they were members of the clergy, they still could not teach or interpret the Scriptures. Their main duty was to maintain order and assist the male clergy in performing duties such as baptism, especially for women. They continued to visit the sick and to pray at their bedsides; in doing so they confirmed the Church’s role as the loving protector of humankind.

**Powerful Christian Women** If women could not perform the duties reserved for priests, they could still be powerful behind the scenes. St. John Chrysostom (ca. 345–407), a priest at Antioch and later archbishop

at Constantinople, complained that influential women could get their favorites chosen as priests. Among the women whom he accused of greed and immorality was the empress Eudoxia, wife of the emperor Arcadius (r. 383–408). In the end she got Chrysostom exiled to a remote place in Armenia.

Women, especially those in the court, could also contribute stupendous fortunes to the founding of churches. St. Helena, the mother of the emperor Constantine, founded churches in Palestine, and others are known to have endowed hospitals and monasteries. Above all, historians have pointed to the ability of women in the field of conversion as their most important contribution to the early church. Paul refers to the power of women to maintain and pass on the faith in a letter to his lieutenant Timothy: "Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice" (2 Tim. 1). Again, St. Helena was a Christian before her son Constantine became one and probably influenced his conversion. St. Monica, the mother of St. Augustine, was a Christian and lovingly worked for the conversion of her husband and for the salvation of her son.

**Donatists** In 303, Diocletian issued an edict ordering that churches and sacred books should be destroyed throughout the Empire. Some Christians sought to escape punishment by surrendering their copies of the Scriptures. Those who did so were called *traditores* ("those who handed over" the Scriptures—thus our word *traitor*), and the more steadfast Christians hated them. When the persecutions ended in 313, a party of North African Christians led by a bishop named Donatus declared that the "traitors," even if repentant, had forever lost membership in the Church; all the sacraments they had ever administered—all baptisms, marriages, ordinations, and the like—were declared worthless. Because the traitors were many, acceptance of the Donatist program would have brought chaos to the North African Church.

The result was violent schism, which mounted on occasion to civil war. Refusing to accept the rule of traitors, the Donatists established their own bishops and hierarchy. In response, the more forgiving orthodox Church declared that the sacraments conferred grace on the recipients *ex opere operato*, simply "from the work having been performed," and that the spiritual state of the priests at the time did not matter. This attitude remained the official Christian doctrine until challenged during the Protestant Reformation of the Middle Ages.

**Arius and Arianism** The heresy of Donatus, which insisted on proper order in the Church, partakes of the

Roman heritage of law and discipline within the Western Church. Another heresy reflects the Greek interest in theosophical and philosophical issues. This was the movement beginning about 311 when Arius, an Alexandrian priest, began to teach that Jesus was not coequal with God the Father but had been created by him at a moment in time. Arius stated, "There was a time when he [Jesus] was not." The teachings of Arius raised a furor in Egypt and soon throughout the Empire. To restore peace, Constantine summoned the first "ecumenical" council (that is, one representing the entire inhabited world) of the Church, which met at Nicaea in Asia Minor in May 325. The council condemned Arius in the **Nicene Creed**, which declared that Jesus was coeternal with the Father and of one substance with God.

Arius was exiled but was later allowed to return to Alexandria. **Arianism** persisted in many places, and even Constantine gradually moved to a more tolerant policy toward it. A later council, meeting at Constantinople in 381 under the emperor Theodosius, restated the Nicene Creed. These declarations had behind them the full power of the state and could be enforced as a matter of law, although belief might waver with political currents. Finally, at the Council of Chalcedon of 451, Jesus was clearly defined as one person with two natures. As a human being, he was the son of Mary; as God, he was coequal with the Father and had reigned and would reign with him eternally. This definition has since remained the belief of Christians in general.

**The Church and Classical Culture** Christian writers, although they proclaimed themselves enemies of pagan culture, had no choice but to accept classical traditions. The basic grammars and texts, the authoritative models of argument and style, were all pagan. To defend the faith, Christian apologists had to master the art of rhetoric and use the arsenal of pagan learning. This Christian accommodation with pagan learning had decisive repercussions. Nearly all the texts of the great classical authors have reached us in copies made by Christians, who believed they were useful in education. Paradoxically, these outspoken enemies of pagan values actually preserved a rich cultural heritage that they sought to undermine.

### **The Fathers of the Church**

Christianity became the chief religion of Europe partly because it reached the people through the languages and thought of Greco-Roman civilization. Even before the birth of Jesus, Greek-speaking Jews in Alexandria had translated the Old Testament into Greek; this version, said to have been made by seventy-two scholars, is called the Septuagint (from the Latin *septuaginta*, meaning "70"), and the authors of the New Testament





An early mosaic (ca. 400) showing Christ holding a book and surrounded by apostles in Roman dress. Two women, perhaps saints, crown St. Peter and St. Paul, with the holy city of Jerusalem in the background. The commanding figure of Jesus resembles that of Jupiter in Roman art. From the church of Santa Pudenziana, Rome. Scala/Art Resource, NY

referred to it and wrote their own works in the common Greek of the day. On the basis of these sacred texts, there grew an ocean of commentary and persuasion by the so-called Fathers of the Church, the leading theologians of the second to fifth centuries.

**Origen and Eusebius** The most learned Church father writing in Greek was Origen (ca. 185–ca. 253), a priest in Alexandria. Both the volume and the profound scholarship of his writings were a wonder of late antiquity. He worked especially on the text of the Scriptures by comparing the original Hebrew and the Septuagint; he also wrote extensive commentaries on books of the Bible and a tract, *Against Celsus*, in which he answers the arguments of an elitist critic of the Christians.

Another highly influential Greek father was Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260–ca. 340). His most original work was a history of the Church, which became the

model for later such histories. The most learned man of his time, he also wrote a *Chronicle* of universal history which is one of our most important sources for ancient history in general.

**The Latin Fathers: Ambrose and Jerome** Among the fathers who wrote in Latin was Ambrose, bishop of Milan from 374 to 397. His most important doctrine was that the Church must be independent of the emperor and that bishops should have the right to chastise rulers. In 390 Ambrose excommunicated the emperor Theodosius after he had massacred the rebellious citizens of Thessalonica, forbidding him to receive the eucharist and thus placing him outside the body of the Church. Theodosius admitted his guilt and repented, and the popes of later centuries who struggled with secular officials owed much of their power to the resolute example of Ambrose.



## AUGUSTINE IS BROUGHT TO HIS FAITH

*St. Augustine describes how, after many struggles to overcome his lustful nature, he was inspired at age thirty-one to pick up and read in the New Testament; this was the critical moment in his conversion.*

"And, not indeed in these words, but to this effect I spoke often to you: 'But you, O Lord, how long? Will you be angry forever? Do not remember against us the guilt of past generations.' I sent up these sorrowful cries—'How long, how long? Tomorrow, and tomorrow? Why not now? Why is there now no end to my uncleanness?'

"I was saying these things and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when I heard the voice of a boy or girl, I do not know which, coming from a neighboring house, chanting, and often repeating, 'Take up and read; take up and read.' Immediately my face changed, and I began to consider whether it was usual for children in any kind of game to sing such words; nor could I remember ever hearing anything like this. So, restraining the torrent of my tears, I rose up, interpreting it as nothing but a com-

mand from heaven to open the Bible, and to read the first chapter I saw. So I returned to where I had put down the apostles. I grasped it, opened it, and in silence read the first paragraph I saw—'Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in debauchery and lust, not in strife and envy; but let Jesus Christ be your armor, and give no more thought to satisfying bodily appetites' [Romans 13–14]. I read no further, I did not need to; for instantly, as the sentence ended—by a light of security that poured into my heart—all the gloom of doubt vanished."

From *Confessions*, 8.12, J. G. Pilkington (tr.), in Whitney Oates (ed.), *The Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, Vol. 1, Random House, 1948, p. 126 (language modified).

Jerome (ca. 340–420) succeeded Eusebius as the most learned Church father of his time. His translation of both the Old and the New Testaments into Latin, usually called the Vulgate version of the Bible, is probably the most influential book ever written in the Latin language. It became the medium through which the Judeo-Christian writings permeated the Latin-speaking nations of Europe and was the biblical text most often used during the Middle Ages. It also ensured that Latin would survive deeply into the Middle Ages as the medium of debate and would thus provide a necessary link to the classical past.

**Augustine** Augustine (354–430), the best known of the fathers, was born in North Africa of a pagan father and a Christian mother and accepted Christianity under the influence of Ambrose in 387 (see "Augustine Is Brought to His Faith," above). He became bishop of Hippo in North Africa in 395 and spent the remaining years of his long life writing, preaching, and administering his see.

In his voluminous writings Augustine had something to say about almost every question of Christian theology. He profoundly influenced, for example, Christian teachings on sexual morality and marriage. Like some of his pagan contemporaries, he believed that the world was already filled with people. "The coming of Christ," he wrote, "is not served by the begetting of children." He therefore urged all Christians to a life of celibacy, even though this would cause

their number to decline: "Marriage is not expedient, except for those who do not have self-control." He banned all sexual activity for the unmarried. Within marriage, husband and wife should unite sexually only for procreation, and even the pleasure they took in this act, representing a triumph of libido over reason, was a small, though pardonable, sin.

**The Working of Grace** Augustine was passionately interested in the operations of grace. He sought the work of grace in his own life, and the result was his *Confessions*, an intensely personal autobiography; it is both a record of his early life, when he gave way to material and sexual temptations, and a celebration of the providence that had guided him in his struggle toward God. This masterpiece of introspective analysis is a type of literature virtually unknown in the classical tradition.

In theological matters, Augustine distinguished between God the creator (the author of nature) and God the redeemer (the source of grace), and insisted that these two figures not be confused. God as creator had given humanity certain powers, such as intelligence superior to that of beasts, but those powers, injured by the original fall of Adam and Eve, are insufficient to earn salvation. Only through grace, which Jesus' sacrifice had earned, could humanity hope to be saved. Moreover, God had already decided on whom he would bestow grace; hence, even before we are born, we are all predestined either to heaven or to hell.



**THE CATHEDRAL IN SYRACUSE, SICILY**

The interior, in powerful historical symbolism, shows a Doric temple to Athena (fifth century B.C.) with its original columns, now supporting the walls and roof of a Christian church built in the seventh century A.D.

Art Resource, NY

**Augustine on Salvation** Augustine deeply pondered the problem of sin—the breaking of God’s law—and quarreled with Pelagius, a British monk who argued that sin was only the result of a wrong choice and that people could achieve perfection, do good works, and thus attain salvation. For Augustine, sin descended from Adam into every human being, and doing good works, no matter how many, could not guarantee salvation, which was the gift of God alone through his grace. Humanity’s salvation must await a glorious transformation at the end of time.

Augustine further believed that the power of grace might redeem the whole course of human history. In his greatest work, *The City of God*, he set out to show that there was order in history: Behind the manifold events of the past the hand of God was evident, directing people through his grace to their destiny. Into this

immense panorama, Augustine brought the sacred history of the Jewish Testament, the history of his own times, and the Christian expectation of resurrection. He held that the grace of God united the chosen in a form of community or city that stood against the community of those joined by the love of earthly things. The city of God, in which live those chosen for salvation, was as yet invisible, and the elect who were its members should recognize that this present earth was not their true home. Augustine saw history as moving in a straight line toward humankind’s salvation, as compared with cyclical views among some Greeks. Therefore, to Christians of his own troubled age and to those of later ages, Augustine held out the beckoning vision of a heavenly city, a celestial Jerusalem, where at last they would be at home with God.

## Summary

In the history of the Roman Empire, several great themes are seen. The body politic soon lost direct elections by the people, and the structure of society became constantly more monarchic. As success in war led to an established empire, a long period of peace nourished the economy and saw the development of urban centers throughout Europe. The Empire managed to avoid a near-collapse, and within its survival the Christian religion won the victory of faith. Christians felt able to ignore or transcend the “fall” of Rome—an event that the modern world sees as a possible model of its own fate. The transformation of the Empire, as it is better called, is a challenge and a warning to all who read history; it is also the recognized end of the ancient world and the beginning of a long period in which new nations would use the legacy of antiquity in their own development.

### QUESTION FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

It may well surprise the historian that the Roman Empire, which controlled almost all of Europe in its time, suffered a catastrophic decline. By what means, if any,

might this decline have been mitigated or even prevented?

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\* Available in paperback.

