

THE ROMANS

(500 B.C.–500 A.D.)

The Romans provides an overview of the dramatic growth of Rome from a tiny agricultural village on the banks of the Tiber to an empire of several million square miles—the largest in the history of the world. Special emphasis is given to the sociology of life in Ancient Rome—the lives of ordinary women, children, families, and soldiers—as well as to the great political, cultural, and intellectual achievements which shaped the course of the Western world. The rise of Christianity, the lives of the emperors, as well as the internal and external conflicts which led to Rome's decline are all vividly documented in this richly illustrated text. Challenging map exercises and provocative review questions encourage meaningful reflection and historical analysis. Tests and answer keys included.

MP3396 The Romans

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Early Civilization in Italy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

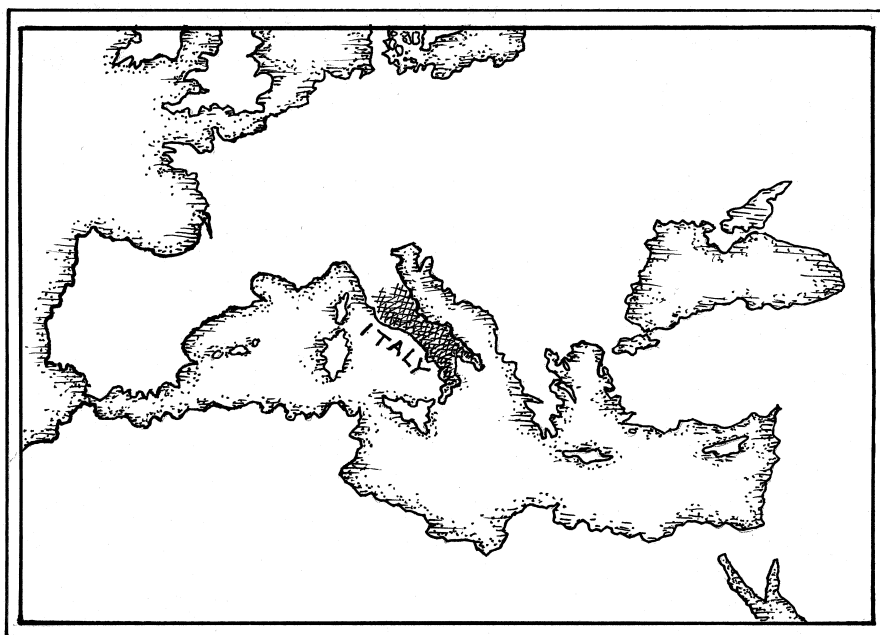
from the outside which carried iron weapons. These invaders easily took control of the small villages dotting the Italian landscape. There was no civilization there for these intruders to destroy, however.

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

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

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

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



The Origins of Rome

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Review and Write

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