

An Empire Across Three Continents

Sources: There is a rich collection of sources to study Roman history, like – texts, documents and material remains.

1. **Archaeological** : a) Amphitheater, b) Amphorae, c) Colosseum, d) Statues, e) Aqueducts

2. **(Literary) Written** : (A) Texts – Histories written by Contemporary Historians (B) Documents

3. **Aerial Photographs**

Documentary sources include mainly inscriptions and **papyri**. Inscriptions were usually cut on stone, so a large number survive, in both Greek and Latin.

The '**papyrus**' was a reed-like plant that grew along the banks of the Nile in Egypt and was processed to produce a writing material that was very widely used in everyday life. Thousands of contracts, accounts, letters and official documents survive 'on papyrus' and have been published by scholars who are called 'papyrologists'.

Boundaries of Roman Empire

- The ancient Roman empire which was spread across the three continents namely – Europe, Asia and Africa.
- To the North, the boundaries of the empire were formed by two great rivers – the Rhine and the Danube.
- To the South, by the huge expanse of desert called the Sahara.
- To the East river Euphrates and to the West Atlantic Ocean.
- This vast stretch of territory was the Roman Empire. That is why Roman Empire is called an Empire across Three Continents.
- The Mediterranean Sea is called the heart of Rome's empire.

Division of Roman Empire:

- The Roman Empire can broadly be divided into two phases, 'early' and 'late', divided by the third century as a sort of historical watershed between them.
- In other words, the whole period from the beginning of Roman Empire to the main part of the third century can be called the 'early empire', and the period from the third century to the end called the 'late empire' or 'late antiquity'.

THE EARLY EMPIRE

Administration: i. The Army – ii. The Senate – iii. the Aristocracy – iv. The Emperor – v. Republic – vi. Provincial Territory – vii. Taxation

- Many languages were spoken in the empire, but for the official Latin and Greek were the most widely used.
- The regime established by **Augustus**, the first emperor, in 27 BCE was called the 'Principate' (which means he was 'leading citizen', '**Princeps**' in Latin, not the absolute ruler). He ruled till 14 BCE and brought to an end the chaotic condition prevailing in Roman empire.
- The Principate was advised by the Senate, which had existed in Rome for centuries. This body which had controlled Rome earlier, in the days when it was a Republic, and remained a body representing the aristocracy, that is, the wealthiest families of Roman and, later, Italian descent, mainly landowners.
- Next to the emperor and the **Senate**, the other key institution of imperial rule was the army. Rome had professional conscripted **army**, which was forcibly recruited. Military service was compulsory for certain groups or categories of the population for a minimum of 25 years.
- The emperor, the aristocracy and the army were the three main 'players' in the political history of the empire. The success of individual emperors depended on their control of the army, and when the armies were divided, the result usually was **civil war**. Except for one notorious year (69 CE), when four emperors mounted the throne in quick succession.

Emperors: a) Nero, b) Julius Caesar, c) Octavian Augustus, d) Tiberius, e) Trajan

- Roman empire made unprecedented growth in the field of literature during Augustan age. Augustus played a significant role in expansion of Roman empire.
- The 'Augustan age' is remembered for the peace it ushered in after decades of internal strife and centuries of military conquest.
- Augustus appointed **Tiberius**, his adopted son, as his successor who ruled from 14-37 CE. The empire he was already so vast that further expansion was felt to be unnecessary.
- Trajan was a famous Roman emperor who ruled from 98-117 CE. He made an immense contribution in expanding Roman empire. The only major campaign of expansion in the early empire was Trajan's fruitless occupation of territory across the Euphrates, in the years 113-17 CE abandoned by his successors.

Territories: The Roman Empire had two types of territories – **dependent kingdoms and provincial territory**. The Near East was full of dependent kingdoms but they disappeared and were swallowed up by Rome. These kingdoms were exceedingly

wealthy, for example Herod's kingdom yielded 5.4million *denarii* per year, equal to over 125,000 kg of gold per year.

A city in the Roman Empire was an urban centre with its own magistrates, city council and a 'territory' containing villages which were under its jurisdiction. Thus, one city could not be in the territory of another city, but villages almost always were included.

THE THIRD CENTURY CRISIS: The first two centuries were free from civil war, therefore, it was known as period of peace, prosperity and economic expansion. **External warfare** was also much less common in the first two centuries. But the third century brought in the first sign of internal conflict.

- From the 230s, the Roman Empire found itself fighting on several fronts simultaneously. An aggressive dynasty called the 'Sasanians', emerged in 225 which expanded rapidly just within 15 years in the direction of the Euphrates. Shapur I, the Iranian ruler, claimed he had crushed Roman army of 60,000 and even captured the eastern capital of Antioch.
- Simultaneously, a whole series of Germanic tribes or rather tribal confederacies began to move against the Rhine and Danube frontiers, and the entire period from 233 to 280 saw repeated invasions of a whole lone of provinces that stretched from the Black Sea to the Alps and Southern Germany. The Romans were forced to abandon much of the territory beyond the Danube.
- There was a rapid succession of emperors in this century (25 emperors in 47 years!) is an obvious symptom of the strains faced by the empire in this period.

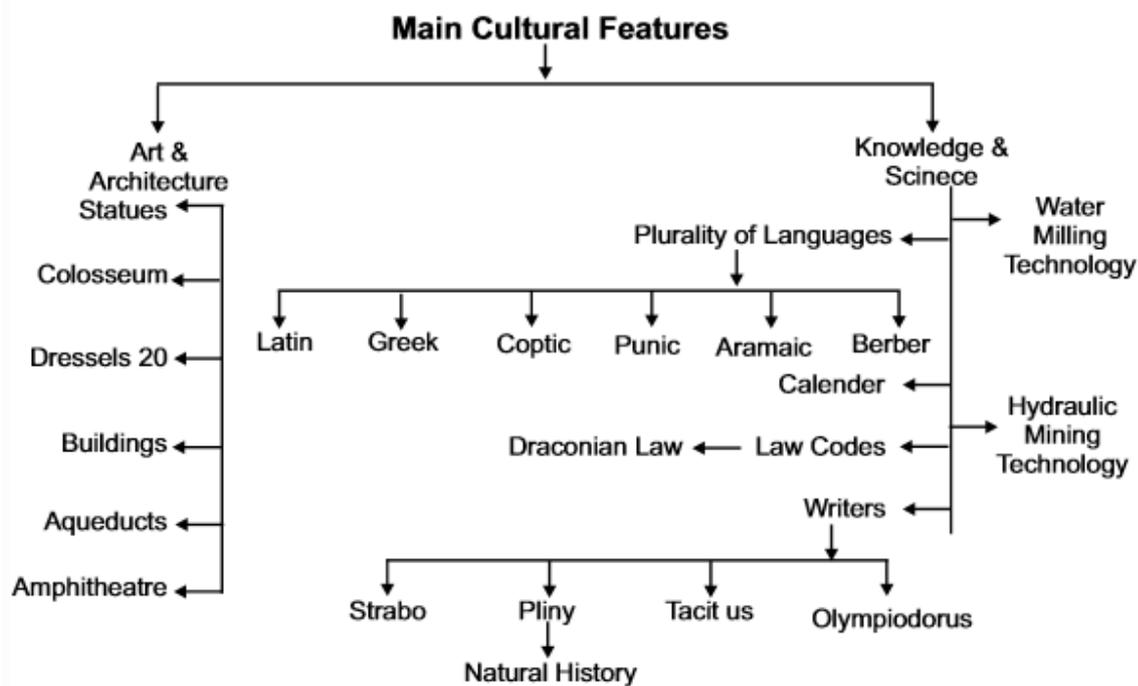
Gender, Literacy, Culture

- The system of nuclear family in the Roman society was one of its modern feature. The family used to be patriarchal in nature. Slaves were included in the family.
- Marriages were generally arranged, and there is no doubt that women were often subject to domination by their husbands.
- The literacy rate was casual and varied greatly between different parts of the empire.
- The cultural diversity of the empire was reflected in many ways. Numerous languages that were spoken in Roman Empire were – Aramaic, Coptic, Punic, Berber and Celtic. But many of these linguistic cultures were purely oral, at least until a script was invented for them. Among the above mentioned languages Armenian began to be written as late as the fifth century.

A. Sources of Entertainment

- Colosseum – Huge place where gladiators fought with beast. It could accommodate 60,000 people.

- Amphitheatre – It was used for military drill and for staging entertainments for the soldiers.
- Urban populations also enjoyed a much higher level of entertainment, for example, one calendar tells us that *spectacula* (shows) filled no less than 176 days of the year!



B. CRAFT & INDUSTRY

- Minting
- Mining
- Amphorae
- Making Papyrus scrolls
- Public baths were a striking feature of Roman urban life

Economic expansion

- The empire had a substantial economic infrastructure of harbours, mines, quarries, brickyards, olive oil factories, etc. Wheat, wine and olive-oil were traded and consumed in huge quantities, and they came mainly from Spain, the Gallic provinces, North Africa, Egypt and, to a lesser extent, Italy, where conditions were best for these crops.

- Liquids like wine and olive oil were transported in containers called 'amphorae'. Spanish producers succeeded in capturing markets for olive oil from their Italian counterparts. This would only have happened if Spanish producers supplied better quality oil at lower prices.
- The Spanish olive oil of this period was mainly carried in a container called 'Dressel 20'.
- The empire included many regions that had a reputation for exceptional fertility. Italy, Sicily, Egypt and southern Spain were all among the most densely settled or wealthiest parts of the empire. The best kinds of wine, wheat and olive oil came mainly from numerous estates of these territories.
- Diversified applications of waterpower around the Mediterranean as well as advances in water-powered milling technology, the use of hydraulic mining techniques in the Spanish gold and silver mines and the gigantic industrial scale on which those mines were worked.
- The existence of well-organized commercial and banking networks and the widespread use of money are all indications of Roman economy.
- A strong tradition of Roman law had emerged by the fourth century, and this acted as a brake on even the most fearsome emperors.

WORKERS:

- Slavery was an institution deeply rooted in the ancient world, both in the Mediterranean and in the Near East, and not even Christianity when it emerged and triumphed as the state religion (in the fourth century) seriously challenged this institution. Under Augustus there were still 3 million slaves in a total Italian population of 7.5 million.
- With establishment of peace in the first century, the supply of slaves tended to decline and the users of slave labour had to turn either to slave breeding or to cheaper substitutes.
- The Roman agricultural writers paid a great deal of attention to the management of labour. **Columella**, a first-century writer who came from the south of Spain, recommended that landowners should keep a reserve stock of implements and tools, twice as many as they needed, so that production could be continuous, 'for the loss in slave labour time exceeds the cost of such items'.
- The position of slave in Roman Empire was miserable as they were forced to work on the estate for 10 to 18 hours.

SOCIAL DIVISION

(A) Presbyterian: (i) The Aristocratic class (ii) Second Class

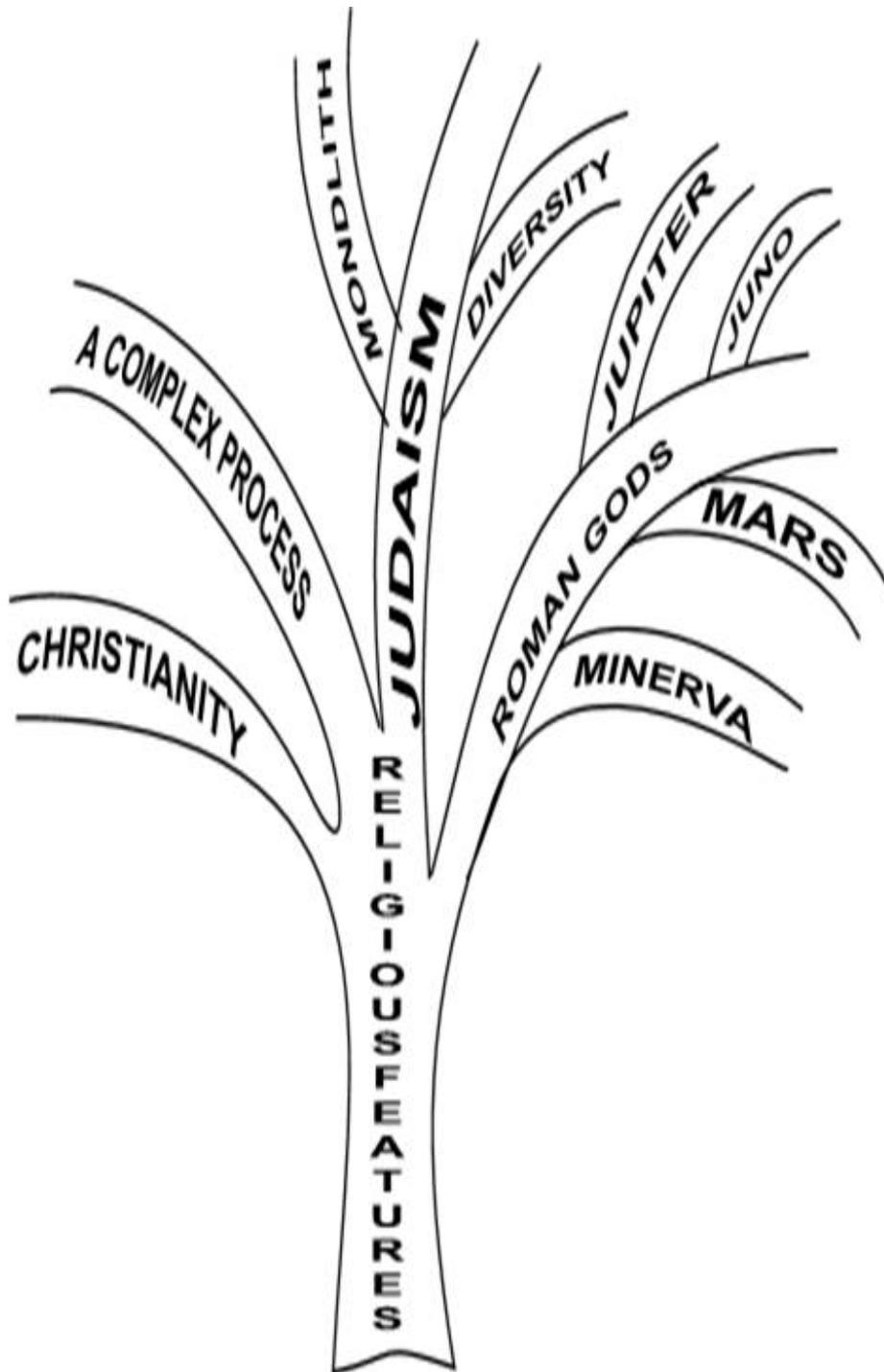
(B) Plebeian: (i) The lower Class (ii) Slaves

- The social structures of the empire as follows: Senators, Equites (horse men and knights), the respectable section of the people (middle class), lower class and finally the slaves.
- In the early third century when the Senate numbered roughly 1,000, approximately half of all senators still came from Italian families. By the *late* empire, the senators and the Equites had *merged* into a unified and expanded aristocracy.
- The 'middle' class now consisted of the considerable mass of persons connected with imperial service in the bureaucracy. Below them were the vast mass of the lower classes known collectively *ashumiliores* (literally- 'Lower'). They comprised a rural labour force.
- The late Roman bureaucracy, both the higher and middle echelons, was a comparatively affluent group because it drew the bulk of its salary in gold and invested much of this in buying up assets like land. There was a great deal of corruption, especially in the judicial system and in the administration of military supplies.

JEWISH WAR

- Roman people were polytheists and used to worship several gods and goddesses. Their popular deities were Jupiter, Mars, Juno, Minerva and Isis.
- One of the most important religious sects practiced in the Roman Empire from about the first to the fourth century was **Mithraism**.
- The other great religious tradition in the empire was **Judaism**. It considered *Jehova* as the creator of the universe.
- But Judaism was not a monolith either, and there was a great deal of diversity within the Jewish communities of late antiquity. Thus, the 'Christianisation' of the empire in the fourth and fifth centuries was a gradual and complex process.
- Polytheism did not disappear overnight, especially in the western provinces, where the Christian bishops waged a running battle against beliefs and practices they condemned more than the Christian laity (the ordinary members of a religious community as opposed to the priests or clergy who have official positions within the community) did.
- The boundaries between religious communities were much more fluid in the fourth century than they would become thanks to the repeated efforts of

religious leaders, the powerful bishops who now led the Church, to rein in their followers and enforce a more rigid set of beliefs and practices.



LATE ANTIQUITY

'Late antiquity' is the term now used to describe the final, fascinating period in the evolution and break-up of the Roman Empire and refers broadly to the fourth to seventh centuries. The fourth century itself was one of considerable ferment, both cultural and economic.

Cultural features of the Roman world from the Fourth to Seventh Centuries: Emperors and their Achievements

I. Constantine's Achievements

a. Overexpansion of the Empire:

b. Capital at Constantinople: The other area of innovation was division of Roman Empire into east and west and the creation of a second capital at **Constantinople** (at the site of modern Istanbul in Turkey, and previously called Byzantium), surrounded on three sides by the sea.

c. Christianity was made official religion: At the cultural level, the period saw momentous developments in religious life, with the emperor Constantine deciding to make Christianity the official religion, and with the rise of Islam in the seventh century.

d. Monetary sphere: Constantine founded the new monetary system on gold and there were vast amounts of this in circulation. Constantine's chief innovations were in the monetary sphere, where he introduced a new denomination, the *solidus*, a coin of 4½ gm of pure gold that would in fact outlast the Roman Empire itself. *Solidi* were minted on a very large scale and their circulation ran into millions.

II. Diocletian's Achievements

a. Abandons territories of little economic and strategic importance: Overexpansion had led Diocletian to 'cut back' by abandoning territories with little strategic or economic value.

b. Duces: Diocletian also fortified the frontiers, reorganised provincial boundaries, and separated civilian from military functions, granting greater autonomy to the military commanders (**duces**), who now became a more powerful group.

III. Justinian's Achievements:

a. Justinian Code

b. Expansion of Empire: The reign of Justinian is the highwater mark of prosperity and imperial ambition. Justinian recaptured Africa from the Vandals (in 533) but his recovery of Italy (from the Ostrogoths) left that country devastated and paved the way for the Lombard invasion.

c. Monetary Sphere: Monetary stability and an expanding population stimulated economic growth. Egypt contributed taxes of over 2½ million solidi a year (roughly 35,000 lbs of gold) in the reign of Justinian in the sixth century.

i. Glass factories established

ii. Introduction of *Solidus*

iii. Urban Prosperity

DOWNFALL OF THE EMPIRE

- The general prosperity was especially marked in the East where population was still expanding till the sixth century, despite the impact of the plague which affected the Mediterranean in the 540s.
- In the West, by contrast, the empire fragmented politically as Germanic groups from the North (Goths, Vandals, Lombards, etc.) took over all the major provinces and established kingdoms that are best described as 'post-Roman'
- The Visigoths in Spain was destroyed by the Arabs between 711 and 720, that of the Franks in Gaul (c.511-687) and that of the Lombards in Italy (568-774). These kingdoms foreshadowed the beginnings of a different kind of world that is usually called '**medieval**'
- By the early seventh century, the war between Eastern Rome and Iran had flared up again, and the Sasanians who had ruled Iran since the third century launched a wholesale invasion of all the major eastern provinces (including Egypt).
- Roman and Sasanian empires had fallen to the Arabs in a series of stunning confrontations.
- Those conquests, extended up to Spain, Sind and Central Asia, began, in fact, with the subjection of the Arab tribes by the emerging Islam state.

Timeline: Refer to Page No. 75 of the chapter/ Theme of the Text book

Key Words: Civil War, Republic, Senate, Dressel 20/ Amphorae, Draconian

Transhumance: Herdsman's regular annual movement between higher mountain regions and low lying ground in search of Pasture..