

Roman Empire Reading

At its peak, in the A.D. 100's, the Roman Empire covered about half of Europe, much of the Middle East, and the north coast of Africa.

What made this empire so large and successful? Read the information below and highlight specific examples of the characteristics that contributed to Rome's success as an empire?

Military

The army was composed of three groups: (1) the legions, (2) the auxiliaries, and (3) the Praetorian Guard. Only Roman citizens could join the legions. Each legion consisted of about 5,000 men. Besides soldiers, legions also had doctors, surveyors, and engineers. Although the chief purpose of the legions was military, legions also built roads, aqueducts, walls, and tunnels. Noncitizens joined the auxiliaries, which fought alongside the legions. Auxiliaries were made up of specialized troops, such as archers or cavalry. The Praetorian Guard was an elite group of soldiers who served as the emperor's personal bodyguard. It was the only army group stationed in the city of Rome. The normal length of military service was 25 years. Most soldiers were professionals, whose training and discipline helped to make the Roman army successful. After their term of service, many veterans and their families settled in colonies (towns made up of former soldiers). The colonies acted as models of Roman life for people in the provinces, and the former soldiers provided a ready peacekeeping or police force if trouble arose.

Wealth /Trade

Rome profited from the economic resources of the regions and nations it conquered. Its vast wealth funded the magnificent buildings and art that decorated Rome and other imperial cities. Roman riches also financed roads, aqueducts, and other public works projects. Most of the people in the Roman world lived by farming. Roman farmers understood the need to rotate crops to maintain the fertility of the soil for future seasons. Farmers who could afford to would leave half of every field unplanted. After agriculture, mining was Rome's most important industry. Trade thrived as the empire expanded. Trade routes crossed land and sea, both within the empire and beyond its borders. Ships moved goods faster than the slow-moving carts used to carry merchandise over Roman roads. But both ships and carts had to guard against foul weather, pirates or highway robbers, and spoilage. Rome imported foods, raw materials, and manufactured goods from within the empire. Rome also imported silk from China, spices and precious gems from India, and ivory and wild animals from Africa. Italy's leading exports were wine and olive oil.

Advanced Technology – Transportation & Communication

The Roman Empire's road system covered about 50,000 miles (80,000 kilometers). Roman roads were remarkably straight compared to modern highways. The Romans designed straight roads to speed up troop movements. After the army had pacified a region, Roman administrators then used the roads to promote trade and communication.

Rome had a highly developed postal system that could bring a letter from the most distant outpost of the empire to Rome. Postal stations stood on main roads throughout the empire. The emperor maintained regular contact with governors in the provinces by letter.

The Romans had a huge fleet of cargo ships, which traveled to ports on the Mediterranean Sea and carried goods up and down the Rhine, Danube, and Nile rivers. Permanent navies in the Mediterranean Sea and the English Channel protected trade ships from pirates.

In Rome, a government newsletter called *Acta Diurna (Daily Events)* was posted throughout the city. The paper recorded important social and political news. Officials inscribed important decrees and notices on stone or bronze and posted them prominently in major cities.

Organized Government

The Roman Empire was established in 27 B.C., after the republican government collapsed. The republican institutions of government continued, but emperors held supreme authority. They nominated the consuls and appointed new senators. The citizen assemblies had little power. Emperors headed the army and directed the making of laws. They relied more on their own advisers than on the Senate. A vast civil service handled the empire's day-to-day business.

The Romans published their first known law code in 451 B.C. This code of law, known as the Laws of the Twelve Tables, was basic. As Rome grew, its legal system developed and became more complex. Rome became the first society with experts whose job was to interpret the law on behalf of clients—experts now called *lawyers*.

A general set of legal principles developed known as the *jus gentium* (law of nations). It was based on common-sense notions of fairness and took into account local customs and practices. Much of what we know of Roman law comes from the Theodosian Code of A.D. 438 and the *Digest*, law cases and interpretations compiled by the Emperor Justinian in the A.D. 500's.

Religion

The Romans adopted most of their gods from the Greeks, giving them Roman names. For example, Jupiter, the supreme god, was the Roman name for the Greek god Zeus. The Romans erected temples and shrines to honor their gods. Rulers of Rome were sometimes designated as gods. Romulus became the god Quirinus, and some emperors, including Augustus, Claudius, and Vespasian, were deified (made gods) after their death. Late in the empire, people began worshiping emperors as gods while they were still alive. The Roman state controlled religion. Priests were government officials, elected or appointed to office. They performed sacrifices and other ceremonies to win the favor of the gods for the state. As Roman religion became more political, people turned to other kinds of religious worship. Many practiced religions that promised salvation and life after death. Christianity became a popular alternative to Roman religion. The Roman government saw Christianity as a threat and persecuted its followers. But by the A.D. 300's, Christianity had become the main religion of the empire.