

Chapter 34

From Republic to Empire

EQ: Did the benefits of Roman Expansion outweigh Costs?

34.1 Introduction

In this chapter, you will discover how the ancient republic of Rome expanded its power. By the early 1st century C.E., it had become a mighty empire that ruled the entire Mediterranean world.

The expansion of Roman power took place over [approximately](#) five hundred years, from 509 B.C.E. to 14 C.E. At the start of this period, Rome was a tiny republic in central Italy. Five hundred years later, it was the thriving center of a vast empire. At its height, the Roman Empire included most of Europe, together with North Africa, Egypt, much of the present-day Middle East, and Asia Minor.

The growth of Rome's power happened gradually, and it came at a price. Romans had to fight countless wars to defend their growing territory and to conquer new lands. Along the way, Rome itself changed. The Romans had once been proud to be governed under a republic of elected leaders. Their heroes were men who had helped to preserve the republic. By 14 C.E., the republic was just a memory. Power was in the hands of a single supreme ruler, the emperor. Romans even worshiped the emperor as a god.

In this chapter, you'll see how this dramatic change occurred. You'll trace the gradual expansion of Roman power. You will also explore the costs of this expansion, both for Romans and for the people they conquered.



34.2 From Republic to Empire: An Overview

The growth of Rome from a republic to an empire took place over 500 years. The story has four major periods.

The First Period of Expansion The first period of expansion, or becoming larger, began in 509 B.C.E. At this time, the Romans drove the last Etruscan king out of power, and Rome became a republic.

The Romans wanted to protect their borders and to gain more land. This led to a series of wars. During the next 245 years, the Romans fought one enemy after another. They conquered their Latin neighbors in central Italy. They also defeated their old rulers, the Etruscans.

Wisely, the Romans eventually made allies, or friends, of their former enemies. By 264 B.C.E., Rome and its allies controlled all of the Italian peninsula.

The Second Period of Expansion Rome's growth threatened another great power, the city of Carthage (KAR-thidge), in North Africa. During the second period of expansion, from 264 to 146 B.C.E., Rome and Carthage fought three major wars. Through these wars, Rome gained control of North Africa, much of Spain, and the island of Sicily. Roman armies also conquered Macedonia and Greece.

The Third Period of Expansion During the third period of expansion, from 145 to 44 B.C.E., Rome came to rule the entire Mediterranean world. In the east, Rome took control of Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt. In the west, the Roman general Julius Caesar conquered much of Gaul (modern-day France).

Proud Romans now called the Mediterranean “our sea.” But the republic was in trouble. **Civil wars** divided the city. Roman generals were becoming **dictators**. They set their armies against the power of the Senate. Caesar himself ruled as a dictator for life until he was assassinated in 44 B.C.E.

The men who murdered Caesar thought they were saving the power of the Senate. However, several more years of civil war followed. Then Caesar's grandnephew, Octavian, seized total power. The Senate named him Augustus, or “honored one.” Rome was now an empire governed by one supreme ruler.

The Fourth Period of Expansion The fourth period of expansion began with the start of the empire. It lasted until 14 C.E. The first emperor, Augustus, added a great deal of new territory by pushing the borders of the empire all the way to natural boundaries, like rivers, to make it easier to defend. Later emperors added more territory. At its height, the Roman Empire stretched from the island of Britain in the northwest to the Black Sea in the east.

Each period of expansion involved cost and sacrifice. The next four sections give more details about each expansion. As you read, ask yourself what Romans of the time might have thought about these events.



34.3 Rome's Conquest of the Italian Peninsula, 509 B.C.E. to 264 B.C.E.

Rome's first period of expansion included more than two hundred years of almost constant warfare. During this time, Rome gradually took control of the entire Italian peninsula.

After the last Etruscan king was overthrown in 509 B.C.E., the Romans began to expand their territory and influence. In 493 B.C.E., Roman leaders signed a treaty, or agreement, with their Latin neighbors to the south. The treaty said, “There shall be peace between the Romans and



all the communities of Latins as long as heaven and earth endure.” These new allies agreed to band together against their common enemies. During the next 100 years, the Romans fought a number of wars against the Etruscans, as well as against tribes living in hills around Rome.

Then, in 390 B.C.E., Rome nearly came to an end. A band of Gauls (gawlz), a warlike people from the north, crushed a Roman army and surged into the city. Most of Rome's people fled into the countryside. The Gauls looted the city and burned most of it



down.

With the city in ruins, the Romans considered fleeing. Instead, they bravely decided to start over. They rebuilt their city and surrounded it with walls. They also built up their army. Before long, Roman soldiers were on the march again.

During the 300s B.C.E., Rome conquered the Etruscans and many neighboring tribes. To the south, they battled a people called the Samnites and several Greek city-states. By 275 B.C.E., Rome's conquest of the Italian peninsula was complete. But expansion came at great cost. Romans had been fighting for two centuries. And the Gauls had once destroyed their capital city.

As Rome's territory expanded, the city had to keep a large, permanent army to defend it and the conquered lands. As a result, more and more Romans were forced to serve in the army. Most of the soldiers were plebeians. Many plebeians resented this fact, leading to civil unrest.

Roman citizens were not the only ones who paid a cost for Rome's expansion. Rome allowed the people of some defeated cities to become Roman citizens. But other cities were not treated so well. Many received more limited privileges, such as the ability to trade with Rome. And Roman allies had to pay Roman taxes and supply soldiers for Roman armies.

By 264 B.C.E., Rome had more citizens and well-trained soldiers than any other power in the Mediterranean world. But very soon, the Romans would face their greatest challenge yet.

34.4 Expansion During the Punic Wars, 264 B.C.E. to 146 B.C.E.

During Rome's second period of expansion, it fought three savage wars with Carthage, a powerful city-state in North Africa, for control of the Mediterranean region.

When the wars began, Carthage held North Africa, most of Spain, and part of the island of Sicily. It also controlled most of the trade in the western Mediterranean. The Greek cities in southern Italy had frequently clashed with Carthage over trading rights. When Rome conquered these cities, it was drawn into the fight with Carthage.

Rome's wars with Carthage are called the **Punic Wars**, after the Greek name for the people of Carthage. The First Punic War began in 264 B.C.E. It was fought mostly at sea. Carthage

had a very powerful navy. But the Romans built up their own navy by copying and improving on the Carthaginians' ship designs. A decisive victory at sea in 241 B.C.E. won the war for the Romans. The triumphant Romans took over Sicily, as well as other islands in the area.

The Second Punic War started 23 years later. This time, the Carthaginians decided to attack Italy itself. In 218 B.C.E., Hannibal, a brilliant Carthaginian general, surprised the Romans by marching his army from Spain across the Alps (a high mountain range) and into Italy. His troops rode elephants and braved snowstorms, landslides, and attacks by local tribes. For 15 years, Hannibal's men fought the Romans in Italy.

In 202 B.C.E., Hannibal had to return home to defend Carthage against an attack by a Roman army. There he was defeated in the battle that ended the Second Punic War. Carthage was forced to give up Spain to Rome, along with huge sums of money. For about fifty years, there was peace between Rome and Carthage. Then, spurred on by Cato (KAY-toh), a senator who demanded the complete destruction of Carthage, the Romans attacked once more.

The Third Punic War lasted three years. In 146 B.C.E., the Romans burned Carthage to the ground. They killed many people and sold others into slavery. Rome was now the greatest power in the Mediterranean region. It controlled North Africa, much of Spain, Macedonia, and Greece.

The Punic Wars expanded Roman power and territory, but Rome's victories came at a price. Countless young men had died in the long wars. In addition, people living outside Rome suffered huge losses in population and property. Hannibal's army had destroyed thousands of farms. Other farms had been neglected while farmers went off to fight in Rome's armies. By the time the soldiers returned home, Rome had been forced to import grain from Sicily and other places. Small farms were being replaced by large estates, where the wealthy planted vineyards and raised livestock. Unable to compete with the wealthy landowners, many poor farmers had to sell their land.

While riches and slaves flowed into Rome from the conquered lands, so did new customs. Many of the new ideas came from Greece. Wealthy Romans competed with one another to build Greek-style homes and beautiful temples.



34.5 Expansion During the Final Years of the Republic, 145 B.C.E. to 44 B.C.E.

By 145 B.C.E., Roman conquests had brought great wealth to the city of Rome. But they had also put the ideals of the republic under great strain. By the end of Rome's third period of expansion, the republic **collapsed**.

The final years of the republic were marked by still more wars. Many of Rome's allies resented having to pay Roman taxes and fight in Roman armies without enjoying the rights of citizenship. In 91 B.C.E., some rebelled. To end the revolt, Rome agreed to let all free Italians become Roman citizens.

Rome also had to fight to put down slave revolts. As Romans conquered new territory, they brought hundreds of thousands of prisoners to Roman lands. They turned them into slaves who labored on farms and in the city. Although some slaves were respected, Romans often treated their slaves very harshly. A slave named Spartacus led a famous revolt in 73 B.C.E. After crushing his army and killing Spartacus in battle, the Romans put thousands of the surviving rebels to death on crosses.

There was trouble in the city, too. With so many slaves to do the work, thousands of farmers and laborers had no jobs. They crowded into Rome, becoming a mob that an ambitious leader could turn into an army.

Rome's army was producing many such leaders. Generals used their armies to gain fame and power in far-off lands and then to fight for influence in Rome. In one such civil war in the 80s B.C.E., 200,000 Romans were killed.

Forty years later, another civil war broke out between two ambitious generals, Pompey (POM-pee) and **Julius Caesar** (SEE-zer). Pompey had expanded Roman rule in such eastern lands as Syria and the island of Cyprus. Caesar had conquered much of Gaul.



By 49 B.C.E., Pompey was back in Rome, while Caesar commanded an army to the north of Italy, across the Rubicon River. Both men wanted to control Rome, but Pompey had the support of the Roman Senate.

Urged on by Pompey, the Senate forbade Caesar to enter Italy with his army. Caesar disobeyed. On January 11, 49 B.C.E., he crossed the Rubicon with his army. After three years of fighting, he defeated Pompey. The frightened Senate named Caesar dictator for life. With Caesar in control, and after nearly five

hundred years, the republic was at an end.

As dictator, Julius Caesar introduced many reforms. He gave work to thousands of Romans by starting projects to make new roads and public buildings. To keep the poor happy, he staged gladiator contests they could watch for free. He also adopted a new calendar that is still used today.

Caesar had a **vision** of Rome as a great empire. He started new colonies and granted citizenship to the people of cities in Gaul and Spain. But he did not live to see his vision come true. On March 15, 44 B.C.E., a group of enemies stabbed Caesar to death as he was entering the Senate.

The men who killed Caesar thought they were saving the republic. But they were wrong. Instead, real power would never return to the Senate, as an emperor eventually emerged to take Caesar's place.

34.6 Rome Becomes an Empire, 44 B.C.E. to 14 C.E.

Caesar's murder plunged Rome into civil wars that lasted over ten years. When the fighting ended, Caesar's grandnephew and adopted son Octavian was the sole ruler of Rome. So began the Roman Empire, and Rome's fourth period of expansion.

To gain power, Octavian had to defeat jealous rivals. One of them was Marc Antony, a popular general. Antony had married Queen Cleopatra of Egypt. In 31 B.C.E., Octavian defeated Antony and Cleopatra in a sea battle near Actium, Greece. His army chased the

couple to Egypt, where they killed themselves. Octavian was now the supreme ruler of the Mediterranean region.

Octavian knew that the Romans prized their republic. He told them he was restoring the authority of the Senate. But in fact, he was in complete control. The Senate gave him the title *Augustus*, which means “revered” or “honored.” He ruled for life as **Caesar Augustus**, and historians call him Rome's first emperor.

Augustus encouraged education, art, and literature. He completed grand construction projects, repairing more than eighty temples. “I found Rome brick and left it marble,” he boasted. He also gave Rome its first police force, firefighters, and library.

Augustus ruled over more than fifty million people. He turned eastern kingdoms, such as Judea and Armenia, into Roman provinces. To better defend the empire, he pushed its borders to natural boundaries: the Rhine and Danube rivers in the north, the Sahara in the south, and the Atlantic in the west.

The empire needed a strong economy. The Romans improved trade by building harbors, canals, and roads. Goods flowed across the empire and from as far away as China. Romans made trade easier by establishing a single system of currency.



But Rome's final expansion brought new problems. To reform Roman morals, Augustus harshly punished people for being unfaithful to their husbands or wives. To protect himself and his family, he established a private army, the Praetorian (pray-TOR-ee-uhn) Guard. Later, this same Guard sometimes took part in murder **plots** against the emperors it was supposed to protect.

Under Rome, the Mediterranean world was mostly at peace for 200 years. This period is called the **Pax Romana**, or Roman Peace. But keeping the peace cost the Romans a great deal. During Augustus's reign, one rebellion in the east took three years and 100,000 soldiers to put

down.

Later emperors added to the territory controlled by Rome. From Britain to the Red Sea, a single power ruled over the greatest empire the world had ever known.