CHAPTER 5

Enclosing the West: The Early Roman Empire and Its Neighbors, 31 B.C.E. - 235 C.E.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. The Imperial Center

From the ruins of the Roman Republic, a new political system emerged in which the emperor held absolute power for life. Roman culture was now anchored in an imperial system based on force, as the imperial center, Rome itself, became a model for the whole empire. Throughout the empire as well, Roman law united Roman citizens and separated them from conquered peoples until all free people in the empire gained Roman citizenship in 212 C.E., a sign of the effective Romanization of diverse peoples.

A. Imperial Authority: Augustus and After

While ostensibly restoring Republican Rome, Octavian gained total political mastery of Rome and ruled it absolutely, although he only accepted from the Senate the title of “Augustus.” Augustus created an imperial system that long survived him, and his successors later openly took the title of emperor.

1. The Problem of Succession

After Augustus’ death, the succession of his stepson Tiberius established a hereditary monarchy for the empire, which included emperors adopting able successors. The smooth transition of power the hereditary principle was supposed to ensure, however, was occasionally interrupted by the intervention of the army or civil war.

2. The Emperor’s Role: The Nature of Imperial Power

Under the imperial system established by Augustus, the emperor had four main responsibilities: 1) protect and expand imperial territory; 2) administer justice and provide good government throughout the empire; 3) supervise the public worship of the gods; 4) be a symbol of unity in the empire by embodying it. The latter resulted in a cult of the emperor and emperor-worship.
B. The Agents of Control

Although the emperor stood at the heart of the imperial system, there were other agents of control.

1. The Roman Senate: A Loss of Autonomy

The Senate had a more restricted role in the new imperial system but still functioned, playing a significant administrative role and as it broadened to include non-aristocrats and elites from outside Rome itself and solidifying new networks of power.

2. The Roman Army: Conquest and Coercion

The army not only allowed Rome to gain and hold territory, but also was the most important element in making – or breaking – an individual emperor.

C. The City of Rome

Emperors vied to lavish buildings and monuments on Rome, especially in the Forum, the political and public enter of the city that was the hub of the Roman world. Among the gleaming homes and public buildings, however, the impoverished majority of Rome’s inhabitants lived in filthy and dangerous slums.

II. Life in the Roman Provinces: Assimilation and Resistance

Beyond the imperial center, Rome encouraged the adoption of Roman ways and even extended Roman citizenship, but the peoples of the Empire’s provinces included both those who readily assimilated to a Roman life and those who resisted.

A. Conquest and Administration

The desire to win glory and demonstrate power led emperors to continually expand the Empire’s borders, developing and then extending a well-managed provincial governing system.

B. The Cities

Cities were the key to maintaining Roman control, linking provinces to the imperial center through well-built roads and allowing the interaction of imperial administrators with local elites.

C. The Countryside

Land was the greatest source of wealth and the economy of the Roman Empire was fundamentally an agricultural one made possible by the toil of peasants in the countryside, exploited in order to maintain the wealth of their landlords and feed the cities and the army.
D. Revolts Against Rome

After defeat, the adjustment to Roman rule was rarely smooth and often resentment boiled up into revolt.

1. Arminius and the Revolt in Germany

In 9 C.E., the too-rapid imposition of economic exploitation and taxation on the Germanic tribe the Cherusci led a Romanized member of that tribe, Arminius, to lead the only successful revolt against Rome. The revolt freed the tribes east of the Rhine River from Roman rule.

2. Boudica’s Revolt in Britain

Angered by Roman abuse of herself and her daughters, the British Queen Boudica led several tribes into an open rebellion. Although the Romans put down the revolt, they learned from it that they must treat subject peoples fairly.

3. The Revolt of Julius Civilis in Gaul

Like Arminius, Julius Civilis was a Romanized German tribal, who tried to take advantage of civil war in Rome to lead several Germanic tribes in revolt. Unlike Arminius, though, Julius Civilis was not successful.

4. Jewish Revolts

Despite repeated defeats, the Jews of Judea continued to rebel against Rome because their strong sense of religious identity, rooted in a set of sacred texts, prevented their full assimilation into Roman society.

E. Forces of Romanization

The Roman army and Roman law both, in different ways, worked as Romanizing forces in the provinces of the Empire.

1. The Roman Army

Roman army bases and the settlement of Roman soldiers in the provinces made the Roman army a significant force of Romanization throughout the imperial era. The Roman army mirrored the transformation of the Roman Empire from a collection of conquests to a well-organized state with a common culture, as troops from outside Italy increased in numbers and percentage of the army as a whole.

2. Roman Citizenship and the Law

Roman citizenship was extended until, with the Antonine Decree of 212 C.E., it was granted to all free men and women in the Roman Empire. Since Roman citizens were entitled to the rights and benefits of Roman law, the expansion of citizenship led to
the dominance of Roman law over other traditions, strengthening unity in the empire and laying the foundation for modern legal systems.

III. The Frontier and Beyond

On the edges of the Roman Empire, boundaries and border areas allowed cultural distinctions to emerge between “civilized” Romans and “barbarian” foreigners, who nonetheless affected the empire to varying degrees.

A. Frontier Zones: Civilization and Barbarians

As Rome consolidated her conquests and fortified her borders, and as Romanization began to affect those within the empire’s boundaries, Romans came to view the borders as marking a cultural divide between civilization and barbarism. The borders themselves, however, remained highly permeable.

B. Rome and the Parthian Empire

Highly structured and enormously powerful, the eastern Parthian Empire was Rome’s one formidable rival and Roman policy towards it shifted from attempted conquest to diplomacy, resulting in a mutually profitable exchange of ideas and technologies.

C. Roman Encounters with Germanic Peoples

Despite their lack of political unity, the tribal peoples living north of the Rhine and Danube Rivers posed the greatest threat to Rome and defense against them absorbed much of Rome’s military resources. The Germans interacted with the Romans peacefully through trade, and Germanic men were often recruited into the Roman army.

D. Roman Encounters with Asians and Africans

Trade also brought Rome into contact with far-off China and India, but for Romans “Africa” mostly meant only North Africa and their contacts with sub-Saharan Africa were few.

IV. Society and Culture in the Imperial Age

Just as the illusion of continuity masked genuine political change, social change also occurred within what appeared to be enduring social norms, and the shift from republic to empire had a profound effect on culture and religious beliefs.

A. The Upper and Lower Classes

New aristocratic families emerged as old lines died out, but aristocrats continued to be only a tiny fraction of the population. Most citizens were the poor but free plebeians, the squalor and precariousness of whose lives were only somewhat allayed by “bread and circuses.”
B. Slaves and Freedmen

A huge percentage of the Roman Empire’s populations consisted of slaves, who were subjected to appalling abuses yet nonetheless managed to forge emotional relationships with each other. Slavery was not necessarily permanent, and a slave could hope for manumission, whereupon he could join the ranks of the freedmen and his children could become citizens.

C. Women in the Roman Empire

Aristocratic Roman women had more freedom than was usual for women in the ancient world, and at the most elite levels exercised real political power behind the scenes.

D. Literature and Empire

The development of imperial autocracy and the expansion of imperial might affected both the work and the lives of Roman writers.

E. Religious Life

The Roman Empire made no effort to impose uniform religious beliefs, permitting subject peoples to continue their religious traditions. As a result, this era saw important religious changes.

1. Polytheism in the Empire

Roman religious practice was public, and throughout the empire syncretism, the equating of two gods and the fusing of their cults, was common. Among the slaves and the poor religions that promised a form of salvation were popular.

2. The Origins of Rabbinic Judaism

The loss of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E. shifted the focus of Judaism to a community-based religious life in which rabbis replaced the former priests as religious leaders, thus laying the foundation for modern Judaism.

3. The Emergence of Christianity

Christians formed a new community within the Roman Empire, with a new sense of shared identity, new sense of history, and new perception of the Roman system. Originating in the Jewish community and drawing much from Jewish tradition, Christianity differed from Judaism, especially in its regard for the person and work of Jesus.

4. The Spread of Christianity

At first gaining converts primarily from marginalized groups, in the second century C.E., Christianity began to attract adherents educated in Greek philosophy, which they used to elucidate and explain their new faith – laying the
foundations of Christian theology. Truly revolutionary in its vision of all humanity united under a single God, and in its hostility to other forms of religious expression, Christianity survived sporadic persecution by the Romans to eventually displace all polytheistic religions in the West.

V. Conclusion: Rome Shapes the West

Its boundaries outlining what would become the West, the Roman Empire – while permitting no dissent – did extend Roman citizenship, Roman law, and the Roman way of life throughout its realm, uniting diverse peoples as “civilized” and influencing even those “barbarians” beyond its borders.

TIMELINE

Insert the following events into the timeline. This should help you to compare important historical events chronologically.

Antonine Constitution grants Roman citizenship to all free inhabitants of the empire
Revolt of Boudica crushed in Britain
Varus and three legions are defeated; Romans abandon Germany
Hadrian’s wall built in Britain
Octavian defeats Mark Antony and controls Mediterranean world

_____ 31 B.C.E.
_____ 9 C.E.
_____ 63 C.E.
_____ 120s C.E.
_____ 212 C.E.
TERMS, PEOPLE, EVENTS

The following terms, people, and events are important to your understanding of the chapter. Define each one.

Pax Romana
Civitas
Romanization
Antonine Decree
Latifundia
Aeneid
Syncretism
Apologists
Paul of Tarsus
Augustus
Nero
Trajan
Hadrian
Marcus Aurelius
The Colosseum
Hadrian’s Wall
Arminius
Boudica’s
Seneca
Horace
Virgil
Livy
Tacitus
MAP EXERCISE

The following exercise is intended to clarify the geophysical environment and the spatial relationships among the important objects and places mentioned in this chapter. Locate the following places on the map.

Pompeii
Alexandria
Antioch
Gades
Ephesus
Marseilles

Pickup map from Kishlansky study guide, page 42
MAKING CONNECTIONS

The following questions are intended to emphasize important ideas within the chapter.

1. In what way did Augustus modify the republican constitution to create the empire? What religious and social reforms did he impose?
2. What was the religious atmosphere of the Roman Empire? How did the Jews fit into the Roman political scheme? How did Christianity spread beyond Palestine? What was the system of authority within Christianity?
3. What role did the Roman army play in maintaining imperial order?
4. How did Roman writers draw from Hellenistic sources but also create something quite distinctive? Who were the major Roman writers of the Imperial period?
5. What role did law play in extending the forces of Romanization to all parts of this far-flung empire?

DOCUMENT QUESTIONS

1. In “Agricola the General,” Tacitus describes the “civilization” of the Britons. But did he view the Britons as truly civilized? What is his real opinion?
2. Based on the selection “Galen the Physician,” what can we determine about the relationship between the peasants and upper classes?

PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER

1. How did the different ways that the Romans interacted with Germanic, African, and Judaic peoples mirror the genius of the Roman imperial system?
2. Consider the reasons for the collapse of the republic. How did the Roman Empire attempt to overcome these problems? What was different about the empire? What price was paid in order to make the empire successful?
SELF-TEST OF FACTUAL INFORMATION

1. Which statement about Octavian is not true?
   A. He defeated Antony and Cleopatra.
   B. He received the title Augustus.
   C. He restored the powers of the Senate, making it more independent.
   D. He was the heir of Julius Caesar.

2. The Colosseum
   A. was constructed by Octavian.
   B. often featured bloody events that ended with the death of animals or men.
   C. was used primarily for chariot racing.
   D. could hold up to 5,000 spectators.

3. Which term is incorrectly matched with its synonym?
   A. Pax Romana – Roman peace
   B. Latifundia – estate, plantation
   C. Princeps – First Citizen
   D. Civitas – emperor

4. Hadrian’s wall marked the border of the Roman Empire with the land of the
   A. North Britons (Scots/Picts).
   B. Parthians.
   C. Dacians.
   D. North Africans.

5. A male Roman citizen could
   A. vote in public assemblies.
   B. serve in the legions.
   C. remain free from enslavement.
   D. All of these.

6. The German chieftain who destroyed three Roman legions in the Teutoberg Forest was
   A. Lucius Varus.
   B. Boudica.
   C. Arminius.
   D. Simon Bar Kochba.
7. Which statement about slavery in the Roman Empire is true?

A. The prospect of manumission tended to keep slaves docile.
B. Slave revolts frequently succeeded.
C. Slaves could never gain freedom.
D. Slaves make up about 10 percent of the Italian population.

8. Which author is incorrectly matched with the literary work?

A. Strabo – Geography
B. Virgil – The Golden Ass
C. Ptolemy – Almagest
D. Tacitus – Agricola

9. Why was Paul of Tarsus important to the development of Christianity?

A. He wrote down the Gospels.
B. He spread Christianity beyond the Jewish community to non-Jews (gentiles).
C. He rejected Greek philosophy.
D. He was martyred.

10. Which statement is least characteristic of the Roman Empire in the first and second centuries C.E.?

A. Provincial cities were modeled on Roman urban patterns.
B. Roads connected major cities.
C. Land and agriculture were the greatest source of wealth.
D. The emperor tolerated political dissent.