

## ROME

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Rome began as a small agricultural settlement on the Tiber River around 753 B.C., according to first-century A.D. reckoning. It was thus an ancient city by the time of the New Testament era, and clearly the most important city of that age, for obvious reasons. The transformation of the settlement or village into an actual city seems to have been accomplished by the Etruscans somewhere around 600 B.C. This required the draining of marshy land, the building of a city wall, the paving of various areas, and the construction of public buildings. The Etruscans also developed this city into the leading metropolis in central Italy, including setting the pattern for Rome's legal and religious systems.

Though it was not called such, by the second century B.C. Rome possessed an empire in the western Mediterranean that included Spain, northwest Africa (spoil of the Punic Wars with Carthage), and southern Gaul. Already in this period, for administrative purposes, these territories were organized into provinces governed by senatorial proconsuls. This was to serve as the blueprint for the expansion in the east, which began even before the Julio-Claudian era.

The impact of the continuing expansion of the empire is that money and other resources, including human resources (slaves), flowed with great regularity into Rome, and the city gained considerable wealth and came to rival even Alexandria as a center of commerce and prosperity. Empire building proved to be profitable, especially for the upper echelon of Roman society, and the results could be seen in the city itself as massive building campaigns were undertaken by Augustus and other wealthy Romans. Augustus bragged that the city he took over made of brick, he left behind made of marble (Suetonius, *Augustus* 28.3).

The Mediterranean came to be seen as (and even called) a giant Roman lake, and the territories around it as sources of materials, people, and revenue to support and help build a greater Rome. Once Rome became a prosperous city, many throughout Italy and elsewhere in the empire sold farms and property to move to the capital and make a better living. But unfortunately, these now landless people often did not find sufficient work to allow them to live the good life, necessitating already in the second century B.C. the creation of a public welfare system. Rome became a city like many modern cities, with the same disparities between rich and poor, between well-built and poorly built areas, and with the same social problems—poverty, hunger, homelessness, and the like. The setting up of the dole of grain in 22 B.C. by Augustus was necessary to prevent social unrest in the city.

The city of Rome had certain natural advantages. There was the Tiber, of course, but also the indispensable resources of silex, with which Rome could be paved. Silex was provided by the lava flow from the Alban volcano, which came within a few miles of the city and provided the raw material for street construction. The city, having been built on seven hills, was quite difficult to take in battle. It was once called a "suspended city," meaning a city hung from several hills. In such a situation, dwellings had to be vertical in character, hence the *insulae*, or what we would call high-rise apartment structures. This mode of building, using mostly timbers,



made Rome in the dry season a natural fire hazard as well. The technology of kiln-fired bricks fully developed only by the time of Nero, and reconstruction of Rome after the fire of A.D. 64 was on the more solid and sound basis of brick rather than timber for the most part, augmented by wider streets to help keep fires from spreading.

The means by which such massive construction projects could be undertaken was largely slave labor. Though Corinth had major slave markets, without a doubt Rome had the largest slave population in the empire. Slaves in Rome were not simply domestic servants; they were artisans, businesspeople, tutors, civil servants, and a number of other things. Of the fourteen major districts of Rome, none could have been run without slave labor, and all had a slave population. While certain ethnic groups, like Jews, lived in particular parts of the city, slaves were everywhere. A conservative estimate would suggest that at least a third, if not a half, of the population of Rome was slaves, meaning perhaps more than one hundred thousand slaves. The economy depended quite literally on slave labor, and nowhere was that more evident than in the Eternal City itself.

Needless to say, to deal with the big-city problems, Rome had an adequate police force, and a military presence was necessary. Ulpian states that the job of the city prefect was "to maintain soldiers on guard-duty to preserve quiet among the populares and to keep him informed about what is happening where" (Ulpian, *Digest* 1.12.1-12). Augustus for the first time made available more military manpower for the local magistrates to use. In fact, the city prefect had three urban cohorts, or fifteen hundred men, at his disposal. Also, in 22 B.C. Augustus set up the city watch, composed of six hundred slaves, a force that grew to almost four thousand by A.D. 55. Their principal task was to be city firefighters.

Rome was the most cosmopolitan of all cities in the empire; indeed, it was the empire in microcosm with representatives of every race, ethnic group, religious persuasion, and social status to be found in the empire. Under such circumstances, it is surprising that there was not more unrest in the Eternal City.