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# UNIT 13 THE ROMAN EMPIRE

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## 13.1 INTRODUCTION

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You have read in Unit 12 that Alexander the Great created a vast, but shortlived empire, which was partitioned soon after his death. Following the end of the Persian empire, and with the disruption of the unity of Alexander's Macedonian empire, a new political entity rose to prominence in the Mediterranean region. This was the Roman empire which became the largest and most enduring empire in antiquity. The nucleus of the empire lay in Italy and subsequently it encompassed the entire Mediterranean world. Roman expansion into the Mediterranean began soon after the break-up of the Macedonian empire. By this time the city of Rome in Italy had succeeded in bringing almost the entire Italian peninsula under its control.

Rome was among the many settlements of Latin-speaking people in Italy. Latin forms part of the broad Indo-European group of languages. In the period after c. 2000 BC several Indo-European tribes were settled in Italy and these intermingled with indigenous groups such as the Etruscans. Both the Latins and the Etruscans played an important role in the early phase of the history of Rome. Rome, located on the banks of the Tiber river in the central part of Italy not far from the western coast of the peninsula, was traditionally supposed to have been founded in 753 BC. According to the traditional history of the city, settlements on seven hills along the Tiber river were enclosed by a wall in 753 BC. This became the city of Rome. However, the historicity of this date has not been established. The archaeological evidence suggests that the city was first fortified at a much later date, c. 550 BC. It is around this time that the population of the settlements on the seven hills began to expand. The low-

lying area around the hills was initially covered with swamps and these had to be drained before the foothills could be inhabited. The rural settlements enclosed by the wall soon grew into a major urban centre.

Our knowledge of the early history of Rome is rather sketchy. According to tradition Rome had become a republic by 510 BC. Monarchy was abolished. After this date the city was ruled by an oligarchy consisting of the wealthy Latin aristocracy of Rome. This makes the Roman empire very different from the other empires which we have discussed in the previous units. The Roman empire was unique in that for nearly five centuries it had a republican form of government and was not ruled by a monarchy. The government was headed by two magistrates, called Consuls, who were elected annually. The main instrument of aristocratic power was the oligarchical council or Senate. The Senate was the supreme body of the Roman Republic. There were also assemblies of citizens, though at the beginning of the Republic they had almost no share in governance. The last hundred years of the republic witnessed the rise of professional army. The segments of this army were controlled by war commanders and were loyal to them rather than the State. These commanders or war lords had regular conflicts with each other and also as a group with Roman State. Large scale use of slave labour was also one of the important features of Roman republic

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## **13.2 THE ROMAN EXPANSION**

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The Roman Republic lasted around 500 years from c. 510 to 27 BC. It was during this period that the city state grew into a huge and powerful empire. The growth came through series of wars and conflicts. The expansion was achieved over a long period of time in two distinct phases.

### **13.2.1 The First Phase**

In the first phase of its expansion Rome was engaged in bringing the entire Italian peninsula under its control. This phase lasted for more than two centuries, from c. 500 to 280 BC. Rome began by establishing its supremacy over central Italy. It forged alliances with the Latin-speaking people of the area. These alliances provided the Romans with resources for successful campaigns against non-Latin states. The crucial event in the struggle against non-Latin states of central Italy was the conquest of Veii in 396 BC after almost ten years of struggle. Veii was an Etruscan city situated close to Rome and was for a long time its main rival. The victory over Veii placed the land and wealth of Veii at the disposal of Rome. Rome could now pursue its expansionist programme more aggressively. A little later the Celts invaded Rome and destroyed it. They withdraw with lots of booty. This was a serious setback. The Romans recovered soon and established their supremacy in warfare. They succeeded in bringing large parts of central Italy under them.

Having brought most of central Italy under its rule by c. 295 BC, Rome turned its attention to southern Italy. In the previous unit (Unit 12) we referred to the presence of Greek settlements in this part of Italy. The Greek states of southern Italy strongly resisted Roman expansion. Eventually after some fiercely fought battles these states were subjugated by the Romans. This completed the first major phase of Roman expansion. At the end of this phase the entire peninsula was directly or indirectly subject to Rome.

### 13.2.2 The Second Phase

The Romans were now in a position to embark upon a second phase of expansion the objective of which was to extend Roman influence to the Mediterranean. This immediately resulted in a conflict with the Carthaginians who at this time dominated the western Mediterranean. Carthage, strategically located on the north African coastline (in modern Tunisia), was originally a Phoenician trading settlement which had been founded sometime in the ninth century BC. This had grown into a vast empire which included large parts of the western Mediterranean (including Sicily, Spain etc.). When Rome tried to annex Sicily after having consolidated its position in southern Italy, it got involved in a prolonged military contest with the Carthaginian empire. It should be borne in mind that Roman expansion into the western Mediterranean could only have taken place at the expense of Carthage. For over a century Rome fought a series of wars against the Carthaginians.

The wars between Rome and Carthage are known as the Punic Wars. There were three Punic Wars (First Punic War, 264-241 BC; Second Punic War, 218-201 BC; and Third Punic War, 149-146 BC). By the end of the Third Punic War the Carthaginian empire had been completely destroyed and the city of Carthage itself was occupied. Carthaginian territories were annexed by Rome. The territories taken over during the course of the Punic Wars were reorganized into Roman provinces—the Roman provinces of Sicily, Spain and Africa (Africa was the name given to the province consisting of Carthage and its adjoining territory situated in north Africa, broadly corresponding to present-day Tunisia).

Simultaneously, the Romans had brought Macedonia and the Greek states under their control. The Antigonids who ruled over Macedonia were defeated (167 BC) and subsequently in 147 BC Macedonia was annexed by Rome. Macedonia became another Roman province and the Greek states were placed under indirect Roman rule, supervised from Macedonia. Soon Roman influence extended to Egypt as well. Egypt was, as you might recall, ruled by the Ptolemaic dynasty. It became a Roman protectorate which implied that it could no longer pursue an independent foreign policy. Western Anatolia too had passed under Roman rule and was constituted into the province of Asia (not be confused with the continent of Asia). Thus, by the middle of the second century BC the entire Mediterranean was directly or indirectly under the Romans. The Roman empire continued to expand for more than two centuries after this, but the main contours of its territorial orbit were already well-defined. The Mediterranean Sea remained the nucleus of the empire. Before we look at the subsequent expansion of Rome, it is necessary to examine the Roman political structure and the society on which it was based.

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## 13.3 POLITICAL STRUCTURE AND SOCIETY

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The early Romans had kingship along with the senate and assembly. The senate wielded many powers and there were regular conflicts with the kings. In 510 BC monarchy came to an end at Rome and a republican state was established which lasted till 27 BC. At the beginning of the Republic political power was monopolized by the Roman aristocracy. Now, almost complete power was vested in the Senate an oligarchical council. Membership of the Senate was open only to the aristocracy.



### 13.3.1 Social Orders and the Senate

Here one would like to draw attention to a distinctive feature of Roman social organization. Roman society was marked by a permanent division of the inhabitants (citizens) into two *orders*: the patrician order and the plebeian order. The patricians constituted a small close-knit hereditary elite while the plebeians were the common people. However both the orders were included in the category of citizens. The division of the Romans into two orders has a few similarities with the Indian caste system. This division had a permanency which resembles the permanency of being born into a particular caste. A citizen was born a patrician or a plebeian. A plebeian could not become a patrician just by acquiring wealth or political power. For a long time intermarriage between the two orders was prohibited by law. The patricians were the economically, politically and socially dominant group in Roman society. Being born a patrician meant automatic access to wealth, political power and a high social and ritual status. Patricians had extensive control over Roman religion. Many of the important priesthoods remained closed to the plebeians almost till the end of the Republic.

Right since the beginning of the Republic the Senate, which was the main organ of the state, was monopolized by the patricians. Only patrician males could be members of the Senate. The plebeian citizens (and all women) were excluded from it. In the early Republic the Senate had 300 members. In the later Republic the number went up to 600. Membership of the Senate was by cooption, i.e. the original members themselves chose additional or new members. The initial members must have been the heads of powerful aristocratic families who had overthrown the monarchy. Membership of the Senate was for life. The Senate had wide-ranging powers, most of which were not formally defined. The overwhelming majority of senators were big landowners. In other words, the Roman Republic was ruled by a landed patrician aristocratic oligarchy.

### 13.3.2 Officials of the Republic

As mentioned earlier, the highest officials of the Republic were two annually elected magistrates known as Consuls. They presided over the Senate and performed executive, judicial and military functions. It should be noted that the Consuls were elected by an assembly of all the citizens (which included the plebeians) and not by the Senate. Consuls could seek re-election without any restrictions. Till 367 BC only patricians could become Consuls. In 367 BC, following a prolonged struggle, one of the consulships was thrown open to the plebeians. This provision remained a mere formality for a long time because the patricians controlled the electoral process and could manipulate the choice of candidates. It was only in the late Republic that plebeians actually started getting elected to the consulship. This was the only way in which a plebeian could enter the Senate since a Consul was automatically made a senator. Towards the end of the Republic some privileged plebeians were thus able to become members of the Senate.

The Roman Republic had several other elected magistrates who looked after various aspects of governance. There were two very powerful magistrates called Censors. They were elected once in every five years and held office for eighteen months at a time. During their tenure they had to carry out a census of Roman

citizens. This was very different from the modern concept of a census. It was confined only to citizens. The Censors recorded the names of citizens and the amount of property possessed by each citizen. The census determined the eligibility of a citizen, depending upon the value of his property, to hold various elective offices of the Roman state. The Censors also controlled public morality and had the right to take action against any citizen who violated norms of public morality. The Censors had a few additional functions such as leasing out public lands and granting state contracts. All these functions combined to make the censorship a very powerful office. In the early Republic only patricians (mainly former Consuls) could be elected as Censors. Later, just as in the case of the consulship, plebeians too became eligible for the censorship. Besides the Consuls and the Censors, there were numerous junior magistrates, as for example Aediles and Quaestors. These magistrates were also elected. All magistrates served in an honorary capacity (i.e. they did not receive any remuneration from the state).

### 13.3.3 Struggle Between Patricians and Plebeians

The history of the early Republic was marked by a constant struggle between the landed aristocracy and the common people. While on the one hand the patricians tried to concentrate all political power in their hands, on the other hand the plebeians began to assert themselves and demanded that they should also have a say in the political process. The system evolved by the patricians after the establishment of the Republic completely denied the plebeians any say in the government. It is not difficult to see why the peasantry could not be easily ignored. The Roman aristocracy had to seek the support of the peasantry for defending the city and subsequently for expansion in Italy. Roman military organization was heavily dependent on the peasants who constituted the main fighting force. The army comprised unpaid soldiers who were primarily recruited from the peasantry. The soldiers had to supply their own fighting equipment. All able-bodied male adults had to render military service. We have seen that this was the pattern of military organization in Greece as well. As Rome began to expand, the need to have the support of the peasant soldiers increased. Initially the peasantry derived some minor benefits from this expansion, but it was the patrician aristocracy that was the main beneficiary of the empire. The growth of the empire made the aristocracy fabulously wealthy and widened the gap between the rich and the poor. In the early phase of Roman expansion the peasantry was able to extract major political concessions. Through these concessions a small section of the plebeians (the peasants were invariably plebeians) got some share in political power.

### 13.3.4 The Assembly

Given the role which the plebeians played in the Roman military structure, they were able to successfully organize themselves to struggle for their demands. The political system of the city of Rome included a tribal assembly which had been in existence since the time of monarchy. The members of this assembly were all male adults of the tribes which originally inhabited Rome.

#### *Comitia Curiata*

The Roman assembly, i.e. the assembly of all citizens, was called *comitia curiata*. When the patricians assumed power and set up an oligarchical state

the *comitia curiata* more or less ceased to function. It continued to exist formally but had no real power.

The *comitia curiata* was organized on the basis of kinship-based social units called *curiae* (singular *curia*) into which the original inhabitants of Rome were divided. The *curiae* were extended clans which included both patricians and plebeians. According to the information that we have, during the early Republic the total number of *curiae* was thirty. These were grouped into three tribes. Each tribe contained ten *curiae*. The patricians were able to control the proceedings of the *comitia curiata* by choosing appropriate presiding officers. Voting in the assembly was not based on the principle of 'one member, one vote'. Each *curia* voted collectively so that only the opinion of the *curia* as a whole was expressed. Using their kinship ties patricians were able to influence the opinions of the respective *curiae*. They would speak on behalf of the entire *curia*. Most of the citizens were thus reduced to the status of observers. The participation of the bulk of the members gradually became so irrelevant that eventually one official representative from each *curia* was sent to attend its sessions and vote on matters placed before it.

In view of the inegalitarian nature of the *comitia curiata* it could hardly be expected that this assembly would reflect the interests of the plebeians. As a result of growing pressure from the plebeians the citizens were regrouped to form a new assembly.

### ***Comitia Centuriata***

This assembly was called *comitia centuriata*. The *comitia centuriata*, like the *comitia curiata* was an assembly of all Roman citizens (patricians and plebeians). The difference between the two organs lay in the manner in which the citizens were grouped. In the *comitia centuriata* the citizens were grouped into 'centuries'. A century was the smallest unit of the Roman army and was technically supposed to consist, as the term indicates, of one hundred men though in practice the number might have varied. In the initial stages the *comitia centuriata* resembled a military formation. There were 193 centuries in all. The 193 centuries were grouped into five classes. These classes were constituted on the basis of property qualifications. The 193 centuries were not distributed equally among the five classes. The largest number of centuries were placed in the first three classes, which were the classes of the aristocracy and the big landowners. In the *comitia centuriata* the century was a notional unit. Each century did not have the same number of citizens. The centuries of the first two classes had very few citizens in them. At the other end were the propertyless citizens. These citizens were labelled as *proletarii*. The *proletarii* were placed in the lowest class. This class, though numerically very large, was assigned just one century. With this kind of classification the participation of the poorer citizens in the assembly had no meaning at all. Since voting in the *comitia centuriata* was by centuries and not on the principle of 'one man, one vote' (each century counted as one vote), the aristocracy and big landowners had more votes even though they were numerically in a minority. The procedure and functioning of the assembly was also strictly regulated by the patricians.

The *comitia centuriata* was probably formed (or became important) around 450 BC. For most of the republican period this was the main assembly of citizens. Consuls and Censors were elected by the *comitia centuriata*, and all

legislation had to be approved by it. War and peace were the prerogative of this assembly. The *comitia curiata* now only looked after a few matters of a social and religious nature.

### ***Concilium Plebis***

Whereas the *comitia curiata* and the *comitia centuriata* were assemblies of all Roman citizens, there was also an assembly consisting only of plebeians. This plebeian assembly was known as the *concilium plebis*. The *concilium plebis* discussed issues which concerned the plebeians. Soon this plebeian assembly got institutionalized and evolved its own structure. It had regular procedures and elected its own officials. In 494 BC the plebeians forced the Roman state to formally accept two officers elected by the *concilium plebis*, known as Tribunes, as spokesmen of the plebeians. The responsibilities of the Tribunes gradually multiplied leading to an increase in the number of officials with this title. By 448 BC there were ten Tribunes. The Tribunes were elected annually by the *concilium plebis*. For the wealthier plebeians this became a much sought after office. Being elected Tribune gave to a plebeian some access to political power, something that was otherwise not possible at the beginning of the Republic.

### **13.3.5 Conflict of the Orders**

In the traditional periodization of the history of ancient Rome, the two centuries or so from 510 to 287 BC are referred to as the period of ‘conflict of the orders’ (patricians and plebeians). The recognition accorded to the Tribunes in 494 BC was one important phase in this conflict. After this development there were four other major landmarks in the struggle of the plebeians.

- i) One of the foremost demands of the plebeians was that there should be a written code of law so that there was no arbitrary exercise of judicial authority. In the absence of written laws the patricians had consistently abused their judicial powers. The plebeians threatened the Senate that they would not perform military service if it not initiate steps to create a proper legal framework for the Roman state. The Senate set up a ten-member commission (‘decemvirs’) presided over by Appius Claudius. The commission prepared a set of laws for the Romans. This set of laws is known as the Code of the Twelve Tables. It was introduced in c. 450 BC, around the same time as the establishment of the *comitia centuriata*. The Twelve Tables were the basis of Roman law. Unfortunately, the full text of the Twelve Tables has not survived. This code reduced the scope for arbitrary exercise of judicial authority by the patricians.
- ii) The second landmark was the provision whereby one of the consulships was opened to the plebeians in 367 BC. The actual election of a plebeian to the post of Consul came much later. Since the Consuls were elected by the *comitia centuriata* (in which the patricians held the majority of votes) and the names of candidates had to be proposed by senators, it was not easy for a plebeian to be elected to the highest magistracy of the Roman state. It was only in the last hundred years of the Republic that plebeians began to regularly hold consulships. These plebeian Consuls became members of the Senate via the consulship. By utilizing this route a handful of senatorial plebeian families rose to prominence in the late Republic (e.g. the Gracchus brothers and Mark Antony).

- iii) Another crucial reform was introduced in 326 BC. Roman law had a very harsh provision which related to the strict enforcement of formal contracts or *nexum*. If a Roman entered into a formal agreement or *nexum* while contracting a loan in which the debtor's person was pledged as security, failure to honour the agreement resulted in debt bondage. Debts incurred due to frequent participation in wars, as well as to meet diverse economic needs, had made indebtedness a chronic peasant problem. When the peasants and other poor people were unable to repay their loans they were enslaved. *Nexum* thus became a device for the big landowners to convert free peasants into unfree labour. The abolition of *nexum* was thus a crucial issue for the plebeians. In 326 BC a law was enacted which prohibited the enslavement of Roman citizens for non-repayment of debts.
- iv) The fourth, and politically the most significant, landmark in the conflict of the orders during the early Republic was a step taken in 287 BC which gave the plebeian Tribunes full-fledged magisterial powers. There seems to have been a serious crisis at this stage which culminated in another threat by the plebeians to withdraw from military service. The political crisis at home coincided with the plan to subjugate the Greek states of southern Italy. By a law of 287 BC the decisions of the *concilium plebis* were made binding on the Roman state. Henceforth the Tribunes were authorized to enforce the decisions of the *concilium plebis* with the full sanction of the Roman state, with appropriate punishments for violation. This legislation greatly increased the clout of the *concilium plebis*. Its decisions had full legal authority. Correspondingly, the tribuneship became a powerful magistracy. The events of 287 BC are supposed to have brought to an end the conflict of the orders.

It needs to be emphasized that the Senate—the membership of which remained predominantly patrician—never gave up its preeminent position within the Roman state. It made a few concessions by allowing the assemblies of Roman citizens and the *concilium plebis* to have some say in the affairs of the Roman state. But the Senate retained its overall control over the decision-making process. This gave rise to new contradictions which eventually brought about the end of the Republic.

### 13.3.6 Social Differentiation in Plebeians

At the beginning of the Republic most of the plebeians had been peasants. By the late Republic the plebeian order had become socially differentiated. At one end was a tiny elite among the plebeians. This elite had used political concessions to gain access to power and wealth. A handful of plebeian senatorial families came into existence which enjoyed almost the same status as the patrician aristocracy. This small section of the plebeians had fully become a part of the ruling oligarchy of Rome by the late Republic. The plebeian elite had little in common with the rest of the plebeians and was no longer interested in struggling for the rights of the peasantry.

At the other end were the propertyless citizens. In the early Republic most of the plebeians had owned some land, but by the third century BC many of them had lost their holdings. In the *comitia centuriata* the propertyless citizens were placed in the single century allotted to the *proletarii*. In between the plebeian elite and the landless class stood the peasantry. The Roman small peasants

were called *assidui*. The *assidui* constituted the bulk of the Roman infantry. The abolition of debt bondage in 326 BC had placed restrictions on the enslavement of peasants for non-repayment of loans. However, the peasants continued to lose their landholdings. This situation was further aggravated due to their participation in wars of expansion that went on for many centuries. After 146 BC the struggle of the peasants centred around the question of land reforms. The question of land reform had assumed urgency not only due to the desperate condition of the *assidui* but also because without land peasants were unable to mobilize resources to render military service. Land reforms were unacceptable to the aristocracy. Due to their violent opposition, it was just not possible to carry out any redistribution of holdings.

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## 13.4 CONFLICTS AND EXPANSION

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The republic experienced some unique changes during last hundred years of its existence. The most important of these was the creation of a professional army under individual commanders. These armies were fiercely loyal to their commanders. These commanders led campaigns for enhancing their powers and resources. The commanders with increase in their powers entered into conflicts with each other as well as the senate to control the republic. In this section we have a brief discussion on these important developments.

### 13.4.1 Professional Army and War Lords

In the Roman republic small land holding peasants were the main strength of the army. These soldiers had to arrange their own weapons and battle gear. The desperate condition of peasants, as discussed in the previous section had implications for the army also.

The opposition to land redistribution and the dwindling size of the *assidui* class necessitated an immediate solution to the problem of recruiting soldiers. Landless citizens could not be made to render military service out of their own resources. Earlier, a partial solution had been found by raising auxiliary contingents from subjugated territories. A portion of the cavalry was also maintained at state expense. In 100 BC Marius who held the post of Consul for several terms and was a leading political and military figure, introduced changes in the military organization of Rome by inducting paid troops. Roman soldiers now began to receive a salary from the state. The creation of a professional standing army which was commanded by military leaders drawn from the aristocracy gave a new dimension to the political conflicts in Rome. Previously the *assidui* soldiers would return home after a campaign and go back to their fields. Paid soldiers were permanently engaged in campaigns and were stationed for long periods outside Italy in distant parts of the empire. The army units developed an identity and cohesiveness which was not present earlier. The units were fiercely loyal to their commanders to whose planning and strategy they attributed their achievements. This was particularly the case with the more successful commanders. Victory in war gave a chance to the soldiers to loot and plunder.

With large well-trained armies under them the military leaders of the aristocracy could violently assert themselves for controlling the Roman state. There were several such commanders in the period between 100 BC and 27 BC: Marius himself, Sulla, Crassus, Pompey, Julius Caesar, Mark Antony and Augustus.

The army was increasingly deployed to suppress discontent and to promote the interests of the aristocracy. It was also used in the personal factional conflicts of the aristocracy. The army itself became a factor in the politics of Rome.

The disappearance of the *assidui* as a class transformed the character of the Republic. Roman citizens in central Italy were now mainly propertyless plebeians. Having no means of subsistence at their disposal they congregated in the city of Rome where cheap rations were available. Considering that most of the *proletarii* could not afford even subsidized grain the Roman state began to distribute free grain to the most destitute citizens. It has been estimated by c. 50 BC about 320,000 citizens were receiving free grain. These impoverished *proletarii* could be easily manipulated by the aristocracy in their political conflicts.

### 13.4.2 Wars for Expansion

The social and political developments at Rome in the late Republic coincided with major military campaigns in West Asia. In continuation of the objective to bring the Hellenistic kingdoms in this region under its control, Rome had been constantly intervening in the affairs of the western Mediterranean region and West Asia. Macedonia had been annexed, the Greek states had been forced to accept Roman supremacy, western Anatolia had been organized as the province of Asia, the Seleucids (who now ruled only over Syria) had been defeated in war, and Egypt was made a protectorate. The Romans had to maintain a very large army in the east in order to consolidate their position and to crush resistance. The command of this vast army became a matter of dispute among the political and military leaders of Rome. Marius, had been given charge of the campaigns in the east for some time. He was opposed by Sulla who at that time headed the most conservative group within the patrician aristocracy. Sulla was stationed in the east and he refused to hand over command to Marius. Instead, he marched to Rome with the army and tried to forcibly seize power. As a result a Civil War broke out between the supporters of Sulla and Marius.

In this Civil War, which lasted from 88 to 82 BC, Sulla soon got the upper hand. His task was made easier by the death of Marius in 86 BC. Following this he carried out military campaigns in Anatolia and Greece and was successful in putting down the resistance to Roman occupation in the area. This added to his prestige and increased his hold over the army. He used his power to become absolute ruler of the Roman empire. Sulla returned to Rome in 82 BC and with the help of the army brutally suppressed his opponents. In 81 BC he got himself appointed Dictator (this was a formal position in the Roman state and carried with it absolute authority; a Dictator could be appointed to deal with an emergency, but could not hold this office for more than six months). Sulla defied the rule according to which six months was the maximum period for which a Roman Dictator could retain this office. He extended his dictatorship indefinitely. Sulla retired in 79 BC due to personal reasons and died the following year.

The dictatorship of Sulla was a turning point in the history of the Republic. From now on powerful military commanders, or 'warlords', controlled the Roman empire. The violent conflicts of these warlords speeded up the collapse of the Republic. The military situation was critical at the time of Sulla's

retirement. The east had not been fully pacified and Rome was faced with a major revolt in the west. Some of the supporters of Marius had launched a movement against Sulla's dictatorship. The province of Spain was the main centre of this revolt. The movement developed into a guerrilla war under the leadership of Sertorius. Between 80 and 72 BC the province was virtually independent. Within Italy itself a major slave uprising broke out in 73 BC and went on till 71 BC. This uprising, which was led by a slave named Spartacus, was the biggest slave revolt in Graeco-Roman antiquity. The Spartacus revolt, as it is called, engulfed a large part of southern Italy and could only be crushed after very heavy fighting.

In this situation Rome had to carry out military mobilization on a massive scale. The military campaigns of this critical period brought four warlords to the forefront of Roman politics: Lucullus, Crassus, Pompey and Julius Caesar. Their struggle for power dominated the closing years of the Republic. All four derived their strength from the armies which they commanded and the prestige that they gained due to their victories. They were also prominent figures in the politics of Rome. Pompey was responsible for the defeat of Sertorius, Crassus suppressed the Spartacus revolt and Lucullus led several successful campaigns in the east. In 70 BC Crassus and Pompey strengthened their political position by getting elected as Consuls for that year. Julius Caesar was sent to Spain to restore order in the province after the victory over Sertorius.

In 67 BC Lucullus was recalled from the east and subsequently retired from public life. This left three warlords—Crassus, Pompey, and Julius Caesar. Pompey was now sent to replace Lucullus. He was given extensive powers which were more wide-ranging than those of any other Roman military commander before him. He was fully authorized to settle the east in whatever manner he considered appropriate. By 63 BC Roman authority over Anatolia was fully established. Following this Pompey managed to annex the Seleucid territories in Syria. Syria became a Roman province with headquarters at Antioch. These developments made Rome a major political power in West Asia.

### **13.4.3 Struggle of War Lords with the Senate**

The Roman Senate attempted to curb the power of Pompey and the two other leading warlords, Julius Caesar and Crassus, but eventually failed to do so. This was mainly because the Senate was unable to exercise complete control over the armies which these three warlords commanded. Nevertheless the tussle between the Senate and the warlords created a serious political crisis. Against the backdrop of this crisis Pompey, Julius Caesar and Crassus joined hands to take over the Roman state. The three warlords formed a coalition in 60 BC. This coalition is referred to as the First Triumvirate (the term 'triumvirate' signified that authority was equally divided among the three). The historical significance of the Triumvirate can only be understood when we realize that the constitutional machinery of the Republic had broken down by this time and there was no effective government at Rome. Pompey, Crassus and Julius Caesar tried out a new experiment by concentrating all power in their hands. The entire authority of the Roman state was vested in the Triumvirate. The other institutions of the Republic were not abolished but they were made ineffective.

The Triumvirate was renewed in 56 BC. However, soon after 56 BC this arrangement began to face problems. Crassus was killed in a battle in northern Mesopotamia (53 BC). Thereafter relations between Pompey and Julius Caesar deteriorated. The struggle for power between them led to a full-fledged civil war. Pompey was defeated in 48 BC and fled to Egypt where he was murdered. Julius Caesar was now the supreme warlord of Rome. In 48 BC he became Dictator with extensive powers. In 47 BC he was made Dictator for ten years. Caesar's attempt to become absolute ruler was challenged by some sections of the aristocracy. He was murdered in 44 BC. The leaders of the conspiracy to assassinate Caesar belonged to the faction of the aristocracy which wanted to prevent Julius Caesar from converting the Republic into a monarchy. It is a matter of debate whether or not this was the ultimate aim of Julius Caesar. Yet there can be no doubt that he was trying to alter the basic structure of the Republic and this was resisted violently.

The supporters of Julius Caesar quickly reorganized themselves under the leadership of Mark Antony, Lepidus and Octavian Caesar. Mark Antony was one of the most prominent allies of Julius Caesar while Lepidus was 'master of the horse' (an important office linked to a Dictator) during the dictatorship. Octavian was a grand-nephew of Julius Caesar and was recognized as his adopted son. Mark Antony, Lepidus and Octavian formed a new triumvirate, known as the Second Triumvirate, in 43 BC. Within a year the Triumvirate had suppressed all opposition. Brutus and Cassius were defeated in battle (42 BC). Soon afterwards, Lepidus was forced to retire from the Triumvirate, leaving Mark Antony and Octavian complete masters of the empire. Subsequent differences between the two led to a power struggle which culminated in an open war. The struggle for power between the two coincided with further Roman campaigns in the east. Mark Antony sought the support of Cleopatra, the Ptolemaic ruler of Egypt. The combined forces of Mark Antony and Cleopatra were defeated by Octavian at Actium on the western coast of mainland Greece in 31 BC. Mark Antony and Cleopatra were dead by 30 BC and Octavian had a virtual monopoly of political power in Rome. In 27 BC Octavian assumed the title Augustus (exalted), the name by which he was henceforth known. He simultaneously declared himself as *Princeps*, i.e. the first and foremost citizen. 27 BC formally marks the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Principate.

Augustus was the supreme ruler of the Roman empire for four decades till his death in AD 14. He successfully transformed the character of the Republic—a process which had begun as early as 81 BC under Sulla's dictatorship. Augustus was careful not to hurt the sentiments that the people had for Roman republican traditions. These traditions had a history of several centuries and could not be immediately abandoned. Most of the political institutions of the Republic were retained and the designations of most of the public officials remained the same as before. Augustus himself did not assume any royal title. *Princeps* merely implied first citizen. In fact it might not have been apparent to his contemporaries that a monarchical form of government was coming into existence. It is only when we place the Augustan era in a historical context that we can understand the implications of his actions and see how he replaced the Republic with a monarchy.

It needs to be pointed out that Roman monarchy under the Principate had

some very unusual features which were in fact products of the long republican past of Rome. Whereas Augustus managed to fundamentally alter the nature of the Republic we must bear in mind that the final transition to a monarchical form of government was actually completed in a period spread over several generations. For a very long time Augustus and his successors maintained the fiction that the Republic had not come to an end. In theory the authority of the emperor (i.e. *Princeps*) was not derived from any divine right to rule but was based on the consent of the citizens. The ruler was supposed to be the embodiment of the Republic. In practice this meant that a ruler had to have the sanction of the Senate and the army. Unlike most of the other republican institutions which existed only in name, the Senate did retain some authority after 27 BC. Though there were no formal rules about how the emperor was to be chosen (dynastic successions were an exception, rather than the rule), recognition by both the Senate and the army gave the stamp of legitimacy to an emperor and made his rule relatively stable. The three main components of the new political structure were the emperor, the Senate and the army. The success of Augustus lay in ensuring that a proper balance of power was maintained between these three components. The stability that he imparted to the new arrangement allowed the Principate to survive for nearly 250 years.

The Roman empire continued to expand under the Principate till AD 117 when it reached its greatest territorial extent. The empire included Spain (including present-day Portugal), Gaul (modern France and Belgium), Britain, Italy, and all of central and eastern Europe south of the river Danube. Romania, situated across the Danube, was also a Roman territory. In the east the empire encompassed Anatolia, Syria, Palestine, parts of northern Mesopotamia and Egypt. In northern Africa Roman rule extended to all the territories located between the Sahara desert and the Mediterranean sea. The entire Mediterranean was politically unified for several centuries under the Romans and was vital for sustaining its economy. Control over the Mediterranean facilitated long-distance trade and communications.

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## 13.5 SLAVERY

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We have noted that large-scale slavery was an important feature of the Greek social formation. However it was in Rome that slavery reached its most extensive development in the ancient world. The Roman aristocracy had acquired vast landed estates in the western portion of the empire (especially in Spain, Gaul and Italy). The conquest of these territories opened up new possibilities for the expansion of slavery. The agrarian economy of western Europe was dominated by the huge landed estates known as *latifundia*. The estates of big landowners in classical Greece bear no comparison with the size of the *latifundia*. In Greece large holdings ranged in size from 75 to 100 acres. Estates above 100 acres were unusual. The *latifundia* of the Roman aristocracy were normally several thousand acres in size. The big latifundists possessed holdings amounting to several hundred of thousands of acres.

Agricultural labour on the *latifundia* was carried out by slaves. The possibilities for the expansion of slavery were quite limited in Greece due to the small size of land holdings. Now the *latifundia* could absorb ever-increasing numbers of slaves. War and piracy sustained slave supplies for these estates. It has been estimated that in the Italian peninsula itself the slave population rose from

600,000 to 3 million between 225 and 43 BC. The consolidation of Roman rule in the western provinces under Augustus and his immediate successors led to the extension of agriculture and of slavery in Spain and Gaul. The era of peace and stability ushered in by the Augustan age allowed the Roman ruling class to amass huge fortunes.

Roman law recognized slaves as a form of property. The commonly used term for a slave was *servus*. Slaves were commodities, bought and sold in the market in the same way as cattle. Slave labour was to be found in every sector of the Roman economy. Agriculture, mining, and handicraft production were the sectors in which they were the most numerous. Slaves accounted for as much as ninety per cent of handicraft production. Slaves were also employed as clerks in government offices. The majority of the slaves worked on *latifundia*. Agricultural slaves, as well as slaves engaged in mining, were often bound by chains. The Roman State used force to keep a strict control over the slaves. Special care was taken to disperse them and prevent formation of any solidarity among slaves. They spoke different languages and had no kinship ties. In spite of the strict control of the state we come across many uprisings and revolts of these slaves. We have evidence for three major slave revolts. The first (136 – 132 BC) took place in Sicily. The second such revolt on this island occurred in 104 – 120 BC. One of the most serious of slave revolt took place in around 73 – 71 BC called Spartacus revolt which started in Capua (near modern Naples). All these were ruthlessly suppressed. In no society throughout human history did the use of slaves attain the same magnitude as in ancient Rome. Rome, like Greece, was not just a society with slaves, but was a slave society. Graeco-Roman society during antiquity may be regarded as a slave society because slave labour was employed on a large scale in production.

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## 13.6 SUMMARY

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In this unit you have gone through around five hundred years of the history of Roman republic. It is very difficult to provide details of all aspects of this period in one unit. We, therefore, confined our discussion to select specific features and major landmarks.

The major expansion of the Roman empire took place over a long period of time with first phase upto 280 BC and the second till the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. Fresh campaigns for expansion in West Asia and Africa took place in the last century of the period under study ( in this unit). The main emphasis was given to the political structure and social organisation in the Roman empire. The social orders, the Senate and the Assembly was analysed. The conflict of social orders led to the empowerment of the plebeians in Roman society. Rise of a professional army influenced the course of history of the last century. The large scale use of slaves in all sectors of the economy was another significant feature of the Roman republic. Roman civilization was so critically dependent upon slave labour that when the supply of slaves declined by the end of the second century AD, the economy began to face serious problems. These economic problems coincided with a political crisis which eventually resulted in the decline of the Roman empire itself. The history of this decline will be discussed in another unit ('Late Roman World') in Block 5.

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## 13.7 EXERCISES

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- 1) Write a brief note on the expansion of Roman empire in the early phases.
- 2) Who were patricians? How they managed to dominate plebeians in Roman Society?
- 3) How was *Comitia Centuriata* different from *Comitia Curiata*?
- 4) Discuss the four major achievements of the conflict of the orders.
- 5) Discuss the process of the rise of a professional army. How it affected the Roman republic.
- 6) Write a short note on the institution of slavery in the Roman republic.

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**GLOSSARY**


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<b>Cuneiform Inscription</b>	Wedge shaped writing usually on clay tablets practiced in Ancient Babylonian inscriptions.
<b>Hittites</b>	The inhabitants of Hittite kingdom in Asia Minor. The Hittite empire flourished between 17 <sup>th</sup> and 12 <sup>th</sup> Century BC.
<b>Ionian/States</b>	Urban settlements along with coast of the Black Sea, developed centres of Greek Civilization (8 <sup>th</sup> to 6 <sup>th</sup> Century BC)
<b>Linear B Script</b>	The script which was used by Mycenaeans. It was an early version of Greek Script. It has survived in the form of clay tablets.
<b>Lydia</b>	One of the important kingdoms of ancient Anatolia. In the sixth century BC, it became a major power. Development of coined money is an important contribution of Lydia.
<b>Medes</b>	One of the earliest Iranian inhabitants of Media in Persia. The Median empire flourished between 6 <sup>th</sup> to 8 <sup>th</sup> Century BC.
<b>Oligarchy</b>	State governed by small group of persons who yield all the powers in running the state.
<b>Phoenician</b>	Inhabitants of Phoenicia (ancient name for part of coast of Syria) or its colonies.
<b>Sexagesimal System</b>	of sixtieths of sixty; reckoning or reckoned by sixtieth parts of fractions with denominators equal to power of 60 as in the division of hour into 60 minutes and minute in 60 seconds.
<b>Tholoi</b>	Large beehive shaped tombs which were used for the burial of Mycenaean chiefs.
<b>Tribute</b>	Payment of money or other commodities of value paid by one ruler to another at fixed periods as an acknowledgement of submission or price for protection or by virtue of some treaty. This is obligatory payment.

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