



THE PAX ROMANA

INTRODUCTION

The term “Pax Romana,” which literally means “Roman peace,” refers to the time period from 27 B.C. to 180 A.D. in the Roman Empire. This 200-year period saw unprecedented peace and economic prosperity throughout the Empire, which spanned from England in the north to Morocco in the south and Iraq in the east. During the Pax Romana, the Roman Empire reached its peak in terms of land area, and its population swelled to an estimated 70 million people. Nevertheless, Rome’s citizens were relatively secure, and the government generally maintained law, order, and stability. The Pax Romana began when Octavian became the leader of the Roman Empire.

After Octavian defeated the last remnants of Marc Antony’s forces in Egypt he returned to Rome triumphant and gave himself the title of princeps or “first citizen.” Octavian was careful not to upset the Senate by declaring himself dictator as his uncle Julius Caesar had done. Even though Octavian ruled as a de facto dictator, he maintained the Senate and other institutions of the republican government. In 27 B.C., the Senate bestowed the holy title of Augustus upon Octavian. Augustus, as he became known, ruled for 41 years, and the policies he enacted lay the groundwork for the peace and stability of the Pax Romana.

A PERIOD OF ADVANCES & PROSPERITY

The 200 years of the Pax Romana saw many advances and accomplishments, particularly in engineering and the arts. To help maintain their sprawling empire, the Romans built an extensive system of roads. These durable roads facilitated the movement of troops and communication. The Romans built aqueducts to carry water overland to cities and farms.

Many of the advances in architecture and building relied upon the Romans’ discovery of concrete. Concrete made possible the creation of huge rounded arches and domes. One of the most famous structures built during the Pax Romana, **the Pantheon in Rome**, has one of the largest freestanding domes in the world to this day.

During the Pax Romana, many of Rome’s finest writers (such as **Horace, Virgil, Ovid, and Livy**) produced literary and poetic masterpieces. Rome became the economic, political, and cultural capital of the entire Western world.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, & THE UGLY WHO LED ROME

After Augustus’s death in 14 A.D. until 68 A.D. various descendants of his reached power: Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero. Each one ruled with varying effectiveness and many of them became notorious for their brutality and insanity. **Tiberius** for example became a reclusive tyrant, confiscating property, executing political enemies, and partaking in various cruel and obscene activities on his own personal “pleasure island.”

Caligula (r. 37-41 A.D.), on the other hand, was mentally ill and regularly abused his power. For example he was so sensitive about his baldness that he prohibited anyone from looking down upon his head and shaved some people who had a full heads of hair. He was also a sadist who took great pleasure in watching people being put to death. In fact, he often requested that killings be prolonged as much as possible. He was sexually depraved, having relations with animals and children. At one point he even invited his favorite horse to eat at formal state dinners and proposed appointing it to the position of consul. Eventually, his bizarre and tyrannical behavior turned the Romans against him, and in 41 A.D.,

his own Praetorian guard (which were a force of elite bodyguards used by Roman Emperors that also served as secret police and participated in wars) murdered him after which they elected his uncle Claudius assume the emperorship.

Under **Claudius** (r.41-54 A.D.) the Roman Empire expanded greatly, taking control of North Africa and modern day Britain. He suffered from physical disabilities such as continual drooling, limping, and tremors in his head and hands. It is said he died after ingesting a poisonous mushroom while others state he may have been murdered. After Claudius his nephew Nero became the new emperor.

Nero (r. 54-68 A.D.) continued to expand the empire's economic wealth while at the same time indulging in his more perverted passions. He murdered his mother, engaged in incest, took advantage of senators' wives, loved to play act, and started one of the first persecutions against Christians by blaming them for **The Great Fire of Rome** (64 A.D.). He eventually committed suicide after he uncovered a plot by the Senate and Praetorian Guard to assassinate him.

Not all emperors during the Pax Romana were unfit to rule. In fact, a series of leaders known as the **Five Good Emperors** ruled in succession and presided over a prolonged period of peace and prosperity from 96-180 A.D. This started with **Nerva** (r.96-98) and continued through **Trajan** (98-117 A.D.), **Hadrian** (117-138 A.D.), **Antoninus Pius** (138-161 A.D.), and **Marcus Aurelius** (161-180 A.D.). **Nerva** was the only emperor elected by the Senate and founded a new system of appointing the most able-bodied person to lead the empire instead of a blood relative. **Trajan** became famous for expanding the empire to its greatest extent, **Hadrian** initiated massive social and construction programs most notably the Pantheon and Trajan's Wall in modern day northern England. **Pius** spent immense amounts of his personal money on the poor and **Marcus Aurelius** became renowned for his philosophical wisdom and military successes.

THE UNRAVELING OF PEACE & STABILITY

When **Marcus Aurelius**, the last emperor of the Pax Romana, died his son **Commodus** (180-192 A.D.) took the throne and ruled with immense brutality and foolish decision making that led to the beginnings of instability across the empire. After **Commodus** Rome saw a succession of unsuccessful emperors. In fact from 180-285 A.D. (105 yrs) the empire went through 20 different emperors all of which were either murdered or killed in battles. In the midst of this chaos in leadership, particularly during **The Crisis of the Third Century** (235-284 A.D.), the empire began to buckle under the pressures of foreign invasions, civil wars, rebellions, and economic stagnation all of which slowly ate away at the progress made during the Pax Romana.

A brief period of stability was returned to the empire with the ascension of **Diocletian** (r. 284-305) who led several reform movements most importantly being his decision to divide the empire into smaller manageable regions which would each be jointly ruled with co-emperors (the division was primarily between east and west). He also initiated the most extensive and brutal campaign to wipe out the growing influence of Christianity across the empire, which came to be known as **The Great Persecution** (303-313 A.D.).

After **Diocletian** the empire buckled under another civil war among the co-emperors in the east and the west. This came to an end with the rise of **Constantine** (312-337 A.D.) who upon becoming sole ruler initiated his own reforms the most notable being his decree to end persecution of Christianity (**Edict of Milan** 313 A.D.) across the empire and his decision to move the capitol of the empire from Rome to the city of Byzantium in the east, which he later renamed Constantinople.

After **Constantine** the Roman Empire fluctuated between stability and chaos constantly suffering from re-divisions and re-unifications, nomadic invasions, political unrest, social and religious reforms, and economic stagnation. By 395 A.D. the empire was permanently split between East (with Constantinople as its capitol) and West (with Rome as its capitol). As time went on the Eastern Empire stabilized and began to have moderate economic and military success. The Western Empire however struggled under continual economic strain and attack by nomadic invaders such as the Huns, Visigoths, and Vandals. The final stages of the demise of the West came in 410 A.D. the mighty city of Rome was sacked by the Visigoth king **Alaric** and in 476 A.D. when **Romulus Augustulus** (r. 475-476) abdicated the throne to the German war-lord **Odoacer** who went on to establish his own kingdom in Italy. This officially ended the Roman Empire in the west while the east went on to exist in flourish.