

Click to verify

































The Romans did not conquer all of Europe. They conquered most of Europe at its peak. By AD 117, it controlled about 5 million square kilometers of land, which is about 20% of the continent's total area. This includes most of the Mediterranean coast, as well as parts of Central and Eastern Europe. The building of an enormous empire was Rome's greatest achievement. Held together by the military power of one city, in the 2nd century ce the Roman Empire extended throughout northern Africa and western Asia; in Europe it covered all the Mediterranean countries, Spain, Gaul, and southern Britain. At its peak, Rome was the largest city in the world, with a population of 1 million or so. The empire controlled 2 million square miles of territory. This many people and this much land required sophisticated administration and technology. It was among the largest empires in the ancient world, with an estimated 50 to 90 million inhabitants, roughly 20% of the world's population at the time. It covered around 5 million square kilometres (1.9 million square miles) at its height in AD 117. At its peak, the Roman Empire spanned from Britain, down to North Africa, and east to Turkey. In modern times, this includes 40-50 different countries, including those only partially conquered by Romans. The Roman conquest of Britain was the conquest of part of the island of Britain by occupying Roman forces. It began in earnest in AD 43 under Emperor Claudius, and was largely completed in the southern half of Britain (most of England and Wales) by 87, when the Stanegate was established. The Romans only controlled a small fraction of inhabited territory: the majority of Europe, the Mediterranean shore of Africa, and the Middle East. They didn't control the vast majority of Africa or Asia or any of Oceania or the Americas. How many years did the Roman Empire rule the world? The Roman Empire expanded across a significant portion of Europe, but several factors contributed to its inability to conquer the entire continent. The empire faced geographical barriers such as dense forests, rugged mountains, and vast rivers, which made conquest difficult. "Almost all of modern Germany as well as much of the present-day Czech Republic would have come under Roman rule. In 1913, 412 million people lived under the control of the British Empire, 23 percent of the world's population at that time. It remains the largest empire in human history and at the peak of its power in 1920, it covered an astonishing 13.71 million square miles - that's close to a quarter of the world's land area. During his 19-year reign, Trajan expanded the Roman Empire to its farthest territorial limits up until that date. The empire stretched from Scotland down to North Africa and swept east across the Mediterranean as far as Mesopotamia, or modern-day Iraq. At its prime in Roman Empire period of 1st and 2nd century, Rome was the largest city in the world, with the population of around 1 million people. And this pinnacle remained for more than 500 years even after Rome collapsed. Rome held the whole of northern Africa. Generally speaking, its control ended where the Sahara Desert began which on average was a couple hundred miles inland from the Mediterranean coast with a large dip at the eastern end which included the Nile River Valley in Egypt. Although Europe represents only about 8 percent of the planet's landmass, from 1492 to 1914, Europeans conquered or colonized more than 80 percent of the entire world. It is normally impossible for us to associate particular ancients with those modern racial categories. But this absence of evidence has allowed the assumption that most prominent Romans were, in our terms, White. However, there is every reason to think that many leading Romans were, in our terms, Black. In AD 43, the Roman emperor Claudius launched an invasion of Britain, and over the next 45 years the Roman army gradually extended its control over much of present-day England and Wales and ventured into territory now in Scotland. In general, it was too risky to go beyond the Rhine, and it was too costly in economic and military resources than Rome could recover even if they had conquered all the lands between the Rhine and the Elbe. The Romans successfully landed in England, established their presence, and defeated the local tribes in several battles. Britain became a Roman province, and traces of Roman rule remain in England today. However, Scotland and Ireland did not become part of the Roman territories. The Germanic tribes were difficult to conquer and almost impossible to administrate. For this reason, the Romans never made it farther north in that region. The Romans achieved high levels of technology in large part because they borrowed technologies from the Greeks, Etruscans, Celts, and others. With limited sources of power, the Romans managed to build impressive structures, some of which survive to this day. At its greatest extent, early in the 20th century, the British Empire comprised nearly a quarter of the planet and an equal percentage of its population. Many of the territories it colonized have since gained independence, though several remain part of what is known as the Commonwealth of Nations today. The Roman emperor who conquered the most land was Trajan. He expanded the Roman Empire to its greatest territorial extent during his reign from 98 to 117 AD. His conquests included significant territories in Europe, Asia, and Africa. But imagine if Rome had never fallen. Would modern society be more advanced today? Quite the contrary would be true. It is actually medieval technology and society that progressed more rapidly than that of Rome, and if it weren't for the fall of Rome, technology would have advanced much more slowly. Corruption, the division of the empire, and invasion by Germanic tribes were the three main causes of the fall of Rome. Some scholars believe that there were other contributing factors as well. Ultimately, the Romans were unable to fully conquer Germania, and the frontier remained a volatile border zone for centuries. The Roman Empire was vast. Its armies conquered numerous African, British, and Greek territories but never advanced beyond the Rhine, as if the legions disregarded those lands. In truth, it wasn't about neglect. There were several significant reasons why Rome did not actively seek to expand its domain in that direction.The Romans did not simply ignore the Germanic tribes; they actively sought to defend against them. Just as Hadrian's Wall in Britain protected against local tribes attacking Roman legionaries, a similar system of fortifications was built on the European frontier. This chain of defenses, known as the Limes Germanicus, stretched between the Danube and the Rhine, marking the edge of the Empire. Parts of these fortifications have survived to this day.Battle of the Teutoburg Forest. Source: pinterest.comAt first glance, it seems puzzling — Germanic tribes were small, often quarrelsome, and largely nomadic, the structured military systems that Rome had perfected. What was there to fear? The problem lay in the “wild” Germanic tribes, quickly realizing that their internal feuds were counterproductive to the factor of Roman incursions. Rome’s favorite strategy, “divide and conquer,” proved ineffective here. The Roman Empire, one of the most influential empires in human history, grew from humble beginnings as a small city-state to a vast, sprawling domain that encompassed much of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. This remarkable expansion not only transformed Rome itself but also left an indelible mark on the regions it conquered and the civilizations that followed. In this article, we'll explore the factors that drove Roman territorial growth and examine how this expansion shaped the empire's trajectory. From City-State to Italian Hegemon Rome's rise to power began in the 6th century BCE, when it emerged as a dominant force in central Italy. As the historian Livy recounts, Rome's early expansion was driven by a combination of military prowess, strategic alliances, and a willingness to grant citizenship to conquered peoples. By the end of the 3rd century BCE, Rome had defeated its main rival, Carthage, in the Punic Wars and established control over the Italian peninsula. Year Event Significance 509 BCE Overthrow of Roman monarchy Establishment of Roman Republic 396 BCE Conquest of Veii Expansion of Roman territory in Italy 264-241 BCE First Punic War Roman victory over Carthage, acquisition of Sicily 218-201 BCE Second Punic War Defeat of Hannibal, Roman conquest of Spain The historian Polybius, writing in the 2nd century BCE, marveled at the speed and scale of Roman expansion: “The Romans, in less than fifty-three years, have succeeded in subjecting nearly the whole inhabited world to their sole government—a thing unique in history.” (Polybius, The Histories, 1.1) The Lure of Empire As Rome's power grew, so too did its appetite for conquest. The late Republic saw a series of ambitious generals, such as Pompey and Julius Caesar, who sought to expand Roman territory and secure their own political power. Caesar's conquest of Gaul (58-50 BCE) added a vast swath of territory to the empire, while also providing him with the military success and wealth he needed to seize control of Rome itself. The Roman expansion continued, with the annexation of territories such as Egypt, Thrace, and Britain. The empire reached its greatest extent under Trajan (r. 98-117 CE), who added Dacia, Arabia, and Mesopotamia to the empire. Emperor Reign Territories Added Augustus 27 BCE-14 CE Egypt, Galatia, Judea Claudius 41-54 CE Britain, Thrace, Mauretania Trajan 98-117 CE Dacia, Arabia, Mesopotamia At its height, the Roman Empire encompassed an estimated 5 million square kilometers (1.93 million square miles) and contained around 21% of the world's population. The historian Colin Wells notes: “The Roman Empire was the largest and most powerful entity in the ancient world, and its influence is still felt today in politics, law, language, and culture.” (Colin Wells, The Roman Empire, 1984) The Costs of Conquest While the expansion of Roman territory brought immense wealth and prestige to the empire, it also created significant challenges and strains. The costs of maintaining a vast network of roads, aqueducts, and fortifications, as well as supporting a large standing army, placed a growing burden on Roman finances. The historian Tacitus, writing in the early 2nd century CE, observed: “The wider the empire extended, the greater was the number of camps required to hold it. Hence the establishment of winter quarters and summer campaigns, and the wear and tear of men and horses.” (Tacitus, Annals, 4.5) Moreover, the incorporation of diverse peoples and cultures into the empire, while enriching Roman society in many ways, also created tensions and challenges. The spread of Christianity, for example, led to conflicts with traditional Roman religious practices and values. The Legacy of Empire Despite the challenges and ultimate collapse of the Roman Empire, its territorial expansion left an enduring legacy on Western civilization. The spread of Roman law, language, architecture, and cultural practices profoundly influenced the development of Europe and beyond. The historian Mary Beard notes: “The Roman Empire still matters to us, more than we often realize, because it was the Roman Empire that gave us the foundations of our modern world.” (Mary Beard, SPQR, A History of Ancient Rome, 2015) From the roads we travel to the languages we speak, the legacy of the Roman Empire is woven into the fabric of our modern world. The empire's expansion across a significant portion of Europe, but several factors contributed to its inability to conquer the entire continent. The empire faced geographical barriers such as dense forests, rugged mountains, and vast rivers, which made conquest difficult. "Almost all of modern Germany as well as much of the present-day Czech Republic would have come under Roman rule. In 1913, 412 million people lived under the control of the British Empire, 23 percent of the world's population at that time. It remains the largest empire in human history and at the peak of its power in 1920, it covered an astonishing 13.71 million square miles - that's close to a quarter of the world's land area. During his 19-year reign, Trajan expanded the Roman Empire to its farthest territorial limits up until that date. The empire stretched from Scotland down to North Africa and swept east across the Mediterranean as far as Mesopotamia, or modern-day Iraq. At its prime in Roman Empire period of 1st and 2nd century, Rome was the largest city in the world, with the population of around 1 million people. And this pinnacle remained for more than 500 years even after Rome collapsed. Rome held the whole of northern Africa. Generally speaking, its control ended where the Sahara Desert began which on average was a couple hundred miles inland from the Mediterranean coast with a large dip at the eastern end which included the Nile River Valley in Egypt. Although Europe represents only about 8 percent of the planet's landmass, from 1492 to 1914, Europeans conquered or colonized more than 80 percent of the entire world. It is normally impossible for us to associate particular ancients with those modern racial categories. But this absence of evidence has allowed the assumption that most prominent Romans were, in our terms, White. However, there is every reason to think that many leading Romans were, in our terms, Black. In AD 43, the Roman emperor Claudius launched an invasion of Britain, and over the next 45 years the Roman army gradually extended its control over much of present-day England and Wales and ventured into territory now in Scotland. In general, it was too risky to go beyond the Rhine, and it was too costly in economic and military resources than Rome could recover even if they had conquered all the lands between the Rhine and the Elbe. The Romans successfully landed in England, established their presence, and defeated the local tribes in several battles. Britain became a Roman province, and traces of Roman rule remain in England today. However, Scotland and Ireland did not become part of the Roman territories. The Germanic tribes were difficult to conquer and almost impossible to administrate. For this reason, the Romans never made it farther north in that region. The Romans achieved high levels of technology in large part because they borrowed technologies from the Greeks, Etruscans, Celts, and others. With limited sources of power, the Romans managed to build impressive structures, some of which survive to this day. At its greatest extent, early in the 20th century, the British Empire comprised nearly a quarter of the planet and an equal percentage of its population. Many of the territories it colonized have since gained independence, though several remain part of what is known as the Commonwealth of Nations today. The Roman emperor who conquered the most land was Trajan. He expanded the Roman Empire to its greatest territorial extent during his reign from 98 to 117 AD. His conquests included significant territories in Europe, Asia, and Africa. But imagine if Rome had never fallen. Would modern society be more advanced today? Quite the contrary would be true. It is actually medieval technology and society that progressed more rapidly than that of Rome, and if it weren't for the fall of Rome, technology would have advanced much more slowly. Corruption, the division of the empire, and invasion by Germanic tribes were the three main causes of the fall of Rome. Some scholars believe that there were other contributing factors as well. Ultimately, the Romans were unable to fully conquer Germania, and the frontier remained a volatile border zone for centuries. Two thousand years ago, on August 19, 14 AD, Caesar Augustus died. He was Rome's first emperor, having won a Third Punic War against the helpless Carthaginians that led to the total destruction of their civilization. In the early years of the republic, the Roman infantry fought in a Greek phalanx. In this formation, soldiers stood side to shoulder in a tightly packed formation that can be more than a dozen soldiers deep. Soldiers in the front were protected by a wall of large shields, and they tried to reach around their shields with long spears to stab the enemy. While this formation worked well on level ground, the Romans found it was too brittle for the hilly terrain where they did much of their fighting. It became extremely vulnerable if a gap opened up in the ranks. To address this weakness, the Romans developed the maniple formation illustrated here, sometimes described as a “phalanx with joints.” Instead of a single line of men, the Romans divided their infantry into groups of about 120 men, each of which could maneuver independently, and arranged them in a checkerboard pattern. Maniples behind the front line can step into any gaps that open up in the front line. The Romans put their least experienced soldiers in the front line (the bottom in this picture), in hopes that the enemy would waste energy fighting them, making them too exhausted to put up a fight when they reached more experienced (and better-armed) soldiers further back.Between 200 BC and 14 AD, Rome conquered most of Western Europe, Greece and the Balkans, the Middle East, and North Africa. One result was profound changes to Rome's military. Previously, military service had been limited to Romans with property holdings, who would serve for a few seasons and then return to their farms. But in 107 BC, to cope with growing demands for military manpower, the Roman commander Marius opened the army to landless peasants and extended the length of military service. Over the next century, the Roman army was transformed into a full-time, professional fighting force. Marius also reorganized the Romans' fighting formations, moving away from staggered maniples in favor of 10 larger formations called cohorts. Fighting effectively in this formation required greater skill, but the professionalized Roman legions had time to learn the necessary maneuvers.After the Marian reforms, Roman generals had to promise rewards — either booty captured abroad or land awarded to them on their return — to attract soldiers to their banners. Because commanders were responsible for making sure these promises were kept, the troops increasingly felt personal loyalty to these generals rather than abstract loyalty to the Roman state. As a result, in the late Republican period (107 BC to 27 BC), it became increasingly common for victorious commanders to march their armies back into Rome and seize power to ensure their troops received the land they had been promised. This led to recurrent civil wars, eventually transforming Rome from a moderately democratic republic into an autocratic empire. This map depicts the deployment of Rome's legions when Rome's first emperor, Augustus, died in 14 AD. Augustus and his successors distributed the Roman army along the frontier, ensuring that no single general had command of more than a small fraction of Rome's troops at any one time. And emperors reduced the soldiers' dependence on their commanders by paying them salaries from the imperial treasury. (Click the image to see the full map.)Rome wasn't initially a major naval power, but when the Romans came into conflict with the Carthaginians, they realized they needed to play catch-up. They immediately built 20 triremes — so named because it had 3 banks of oars — and 100 quinqueremes — heavier ships with five rows for each bank of oars. Beginning with the triumph over the Carthaginians in 201, Rome began to demand that defeated foes give up their naval forces, giving Rome undisputed mastery over the Mediterranean. For the first two centuries of the imperial era (beginning in 27 BC), Rome controlled the Mediterranean so completely that it wiped out piracy and didn't have to fight any major naval battles.In 58 BC, Julius Caesar took command of Rome's northern frontier and set out to conquer Gaul, which corresponds roughly to modern-day France. He was following in the footsteps of other ambitious Roman politicians who had led foreign conquests as a way to bolster their reputation at home. This map shows Caesar's exploits, which took almost a decade and brought him to almost every part of modern-day France. Caesar wrote an account of this campaign that, remarkably, still survives today. While he was on campaign, Caesar's army gained the upper hand in Rome and declared martial law. If Caesar had returned to Rome as a private citizen, he would have faced a trial for alleged misdeeds prior to his departure (the charges had some merit, but he was far from the first Roman politician to bend the rules). But Roman law forbade a general on campaign to enter Italy at the head of an army. In 49 BC, Caesar took the fateful step of crossing the Rubicon, the river that marked the northern border of Italy, with his army. That triggered the civil war that would destroy the Roman Republic. (Click the image to see the full map.)The forces opposing Caesar in the civil war were led by Pompey, a former political ally of Caesar who had once enjoyed a string of military victories in the East. This map shows Caesar's movements as he defeated Pompey and then dealt, famously, with Pompey's allies. Pompey initially fled to the east; Caesar consolidated control of Spain and Italy before following him. The decisive battle came on August 10, 48 BC, when Caesar defeated Pompey at the Battle of Parsalus, in the north of modern-day Greece. Pompey fled to Egypt, but officials there betrayed him and sent Caesar his head. At this point, Caesar's rule over Rome was a foregone conclusion, but it took him another three years to mop up resistance from Pompeian forces. He returned to Rome for the final time in 45 BC. (Click the image to see the full map.)Julius Caesar wasn't the first Roman military commander to march on the capital and take it by force, but he was the first one who didn't even pretend that he was preserving the constitutional structure of the old republic. He had himself declared dictator for life and flirted with kingship. This ran afoul of a deep taboo in Roman culture. After all, Rome's founding legend was about the citizens of Rome rising up to depose a despotic king. So on March 15, 44 BC, in perhaps the most famous murder in world history, a group of disgruntled senators surrounded Caesar and stabbed him to death. Brutus, one of the assassins, supposedly shouted “sic semper tyrannis” — “thus always to tyrants” — as he delivered the fatal blow, though this is probably apocryphal. Unfortunately, while the conspirators saw themselves as defenders of the Republic's system of government, they didn't actually have a plan for bringing back the republic. Instead, Caesar's death plunged the Roman world into yet another civil war.Julius Caesar's death plunged the Roman world into yet another civil war between the two men who had the strongest claims to be Caesar's heir. One was Caesar's longtime deputy, Marc Antony. The other was Caesar's teenage grand-nephew, Octavian, whom Caesar adopted posthumously in his will. Antony and Octavian initially fought side by side to avenge the death of Julius Caesar. But after Antony went east and became romantically involved with the Egyptian queen Cleopatra, he and Octavian had a falling-out, leading to war. This map shows the war's decisive battle, the Battle of Actium, in 31 BC. Antony and Cleopatra tried to flee from Octavian's advancing army by sea, but he was intercepted by a navy commanded by Octavian's deputy, Agrippa. Octavian's ships won the battle, and although Antony and Cleopatra escaped, they no longer had enough forces to pose a serious threat to Octavian. Antony and Cleopatra died a year later, leaving Octavian the sole ruler of the Roman world. Octavian changed his name to Augustus in 27; historians treat this as the year when the Roman Republic became the Roman Empire.One of our richest sources of information about ancient Rome comes from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD. It destroyed several Roman towns, most notably Pompeii and Herculaneum. The existence of these towns was forgotten for many centuries, but the thick layer of ash deposited by the eruption preserved them for modern archeologists. This has given us information about daily life in a Roman town that would have been difficult to obtain from other sources. Inscriptions, graffiti, and frescoes provide insight into how various buildings were used and what people did in the town. Interestingly, we have a contemporaneous account of Vesuvius's eruption from the Roman author Pliny the Younger, who witnessed the eruption firsthand, and whose uncle perished trying to rescue victims.The site of Pompeii was first rediscovered in 1599, but only a few artifacts were uncovered before interest in the site waned. Excavation began in earnest after the site was discovered a second time in 1748, and has continued to the present day. This map shows archaeologists' progress. Some areas of the town have yet to be explored due to restrictions imposed by the authorities. In addition to archaeological teams, the site is visited by millions of tourists each year. There is a surprising amount of erotic artwork on the walls of Pompeian buildings, like this painting from a bedroom in the home of a wealthy Roman aristocrat. Similar artwork was found in buildings that archaeologists believe were brothels. Prostitution in the Roman empire was legal and widespread. Paintings in Pompeii suggest that Romans enjoyed lively and varied sex lives, with illustrations of cunnilingus and sex with multiple partners. Sex was a topic of political controversy in ancient times just as it is today, with the Emperor Augustus trying — without much success — to crack down on adultery.Baths were an important part of Roman society, and all major towns and cities had at least one. Pompeii had three public baths, of which the Stabian bath, depicted here, was the oldest. Men and women bathed separately. In large facilities like this one, there were separate sections for men and women. In smaller facilities, men and women would use the same facilities at different times. The Roman baths included a number of facilities that would be familiar at a modern spa: changing rooms, pools with different water temperatures, and saunas. There was also an exercise yard where men (but only men) could play sports. Roman baths were communal spaces; Romans would talk business and share gossip as they washed themselves. Roman aristocrats would sometimes try to win favor with the masses by building more elaborate baths, and baths became larger and more elaborate as Rome became a wealthier and more sophisticated society.For most of its history, Rome was a pagan society. Romans worshiped a pantheon of Roman and Greek deities, including Jupiter, Apollo, and Venus. From the early days of the republic, the Romans built temples and made sacrifices to the gods, and would consult religious leaders to determine which days were auspicious ones for a wedding, military offensive, or other major undertaking. This map shows the temples in Pompeii. Notice that in addition to temples to traditional pagan gods, the map shows a Temple of Vespasian. This is an unfinished structure that some historians speculate was intended to honor the emperor who was in power at the time Mount Vesuvius erupted, destroying the city. Religion and state were closely intertwined in Roman society, and subjects were encouraged to think of their rulers as semi-divine figures.Virgil, who lived from 70 BC to 19 BC, was one of ancient Rome's greatest poets. And his epic poem The Aeneid became one of the most important works of Roman literature. It focuses on Aeneas, a Trojan who played a minor role in the Greek poem The Iliad. After the fall of Troy, Aeneas leads a group of surviving Trojans around the Mediterranean looking for a new home. This map shows Aeneas's journey, with stops in Greece, Sicily, and Carthage before he finally made his way to the Italian peninsula. There, Aeneas found a successful war with the area's native Latins. This story, written early in the reign of Rome's first emperor, Augustus, became one of Rome's most important founding myths. And it continues to influence Western culture. For example, near the beginning of The Aeneid is the story of the Trojan horse, a subterfuge the Greeks used to take over Troy.Slavery was deeply woven into the fabric of Roman society. There are several ways that people in Roman society could fall into slavery. When the Romans prevailed on the battlefield, they would often take their defeated enemies captive and sell them into slavery. People could also become slaves due to failure to pay debts or as a punishment for crime. Roman slavery differed from American slavery in some important respects. Roman slaves could be of any race. And while American slaves generally performed manual labor, Roman slaves could sometimes be highly skilled. Educated slaves captured from the Greek world were highly sought after for tutoring children and performing clerical work. Of course, many slaves resented their subservient status, and some revolted. This map shows a portion of the most famous slave revolt in Roman history, in which the gladiator Spartacus led an army that eventually grew to 120,000 freed slaves. When the rebellion was finally crushed, 6,000 surviving slaves were crucified along the Appian Way, a major road leading into Rome.As Rome expanded, the traditional homeland of the Jewish people at the eastern end of the Mediterranean came under Roman control. Roman troops first invaded the area under Pompey in 63 BC, and after 40 BC it was ruled as a Roman client state (shown here in green) by King Herod. Not long after Herod died, the Romans created the province of Judea, which was under Roman control for centuries thereafter. The Jews had an uneasy place in the Roman Empire. Romans were suspicious of people who insisted on practicing minority religions, and between 63 AD and 65 AD Jews staged three major revolts against Roman authority. The third rebellion led to a brutal crackdown by Emperor Hadrian. One ancient historian estimates that the Romans killed 500,000 Jews to put down the rebellion, and many more were sold into slavery.Jesus Christ's birthplace in Bethlehem became part of the Roman province of Judea during Christ's lifetime. As a result, Christianity emerged there and spread during the early Roman Empire, one of the most peaceful and prosperous eras of the ancient world. The early Christians, like the Jews, faced suspicion from Roman officials. The biggest problem was that, as the late historian Chester Starr put it, Christians were expected to “sacrifice to the emperor or to the gods for the emperor. To the Christian, this act was one of pagan worship; to the imperial bureaucrat, simply a profession of patriotism toward the figure who embodied the state.” So Christians faced persecution, off and on, from the reign of Emperor Nero in 64 AD until 313 AD. But as this map makes clear, persecution didn't stop the spread of Christianity.Throughout the classical period, Britain was at the fringes of civilization. Caesar invaded in 55 BC, but didn't establish a permanent Roman presence on the island. Conquest of Britain began in earnest under the emperor Claudius in 43 AD. Over the next four decades, Roman troops explored the entire island, including the northernmost parts of Scotland. But the Romans only conquered an area roughly corresponding to modern-day England and Wales. The Romans would govern this territory until 410, when the declining Western Roman Empire was forced to abandon the remote province. (Click the image to see the full map.)Hadrian, who ruled from 117 to 138 AD, was one of Rome's most interesting emperors. Most of his predecessors had sought glory by conquering new territory, steadily expanding the size of the empire. Hadrian had a different vision. He believed the empire was becoming overextended maritarily, and immediately upon taking office he focused on consolidating Roman control of the territories that had already been conquered. He withdrew from a few Eastern territories conquered by his predecessor, Trajan, and he negotiated peace agreements with rivals such as the Parthians. One reflection of this shifting thinking was Hadrian's Wall, a massive construction project that ran all around the edges of the empire, transforming what had been a fluid frontier into a clearly defined border. The wisdom of Hadrian's decision became apparent after 142, when Hadrian's successor, Antoninus Pius, conquered additional British territory and ordered a second wall built farther north. The new wall was only manned for a few years before the Romans were forced to abandon the new territory and retreat to the border Hadrian had chosen.Protected behind Hadrian's Wall, Roman Britain flourished. The island's economy became more specialized and more integrated with the continent. The Roman empire provided its subjects with a reliable and standardized system of currency. Uniform money brings major economic benefits because cash transactions are a lot more efficient than those done by barter. This map, drawn from a database of amateur archeological finds, shows where Roman coins were found between 1997 and 2010. The fact that coins are still being found all over England and Wales, centuries after the empire's collapse, suggests just how thoroughly Romanized these territories became during four centuries of imperial rule.As Rome was rising in the West, the Han dynasty was consolidating power in China. These two great empires were too far apart to have a direct relationship. But they became linked together indirectly through trade networks. This map, based on geographical data recorded by a Greek writer in the early years of the Roman Empire, shows the trade route from Rome to India. Elites in India and China prized Roman-made glass and rugs, while Roman aristocrats enjoyed purchasing silks made in the Far East. Some Roman writers saw the increasing sums Romans were spending on silks for their wives as a symbol of Rome's decadence and moral decline.For the first two centuries after Augustus became emperor in 27 BC, the Roman Empire experienced a period of unprecedented political stability and economic prosperity. But the situation deteriorated rapidly in the third century AD. Between 235 and 285, Rome had more than 20 emperors, and as this map shows, most died violent deaths. Some were murdered by their own armies. Others died in civil wars against rival claimants to the throne. One died in battle against foreign foes; another was captured in battle and died in captivity. It wouldn't have been unusual for the emperor to be dissolved by his own army. But in 285, Emperor Diocletian took power and ended the cycle of bloodshed. He ended the civil wars by dividing the empire into four parts, each ruled by its own emperor. This move put an end to the civil wars, but it also set the stage for a power struggle between the four emperors. Diocletian set up an imperial structure called a “tetrarchy,” in which power was shared among four emperors. He wanted to provide more localized leadership for an empire that had become too sprawling and complex for any one man to manage. But after Diocletian's death in 311 AD, the tetrarchy became a bloody tournament bracket for choosing Rome's next emperor. The winner was Constantine, who made some profound changes to the empire after he became Rome's sole emperor in 324. He created a new imperial capital at Byzantium and renamed it Constantinople, laying the foundations for an Eastern Roman Empire that would endure long after the West fell. Even more important, Constantine was Rome's first Christian emperor. When he took the throne, he began the transformation of Rome into a Christian empire. While some of his subjects resisted Christianity, the change ultimately stuck. As a result, Christianity became the dominant religion of Europe for the next 1,500 years.Constantine ruled over a unified Roman empire, but this would be increasingly rare. Upon Constantine's death in 337, the empire was divided among Constantine's three sons, who quickly began fighting among themselves. This cycle would repeat itself several times over the next half-century. It became clear that the empire was too big for any one man to rule. The last emperor to rule a united empire, Theodosius, died in 395. This map shows the result: an empire permanently divided between east and west. Why had the empire become too big to govern? The empire never fully recovered from the political crisis of the third century, or from a plague that began in 250 and killed millions of people. Rome's economy was hit hard. By 400, it simply wasn't possible for a single emperor to raise a large enough army to protect a domain that stretched from Spain to the Middle East.As its financial health deteriorated, the empire became increasingly vulnerable to invasion. That started a vicious cycle. Rome's wealthy and weakly defended interior became a juicy target for raiders. Frustrated by Rome's failure to fortify their towns and organizing their own local militias for self-defense, people were increasingly forced to stay close to fortified towns for safety, making them less productive and more dependent on local lords. Provinces became more willing and able to pay taxes to a central government that wasn't protecting them anyway. And so the Roman army grew weaker, and the empire as a whole became more vulnerable to barbarian attack. A symbolic turning point came in 410, when Aleric, king of the barbarian Visigoth tribe, sacked Rome for the first time in 800 years. This was a psychological blow from which the Western Empire would never really recover.Probably the most famous of the barbarian invaders was Attila the Hun, who built an empire in Eastern Europe between 434 and 453. The Huns were a nomadic people who originated somewhere in Eastern Europe or Central Asia. Their style of warfare centered on mounted archers, who could fire arrows with deadly accuracy while on horseback. They prized speed and the advantage of surprise. The Romans proved unable to defeat Attila on the battlefield, and the Huns even forced the Romans to pay them tribute for several years. However, the Huns were unable to sustain prolonged sieges, which made them incapable of taking large cities such as Constantinople or Rome. Nor could they consolidate their gains and build a long-lived empire. When Attila died in 453, his sons squabbled over how to divide his empire, which quickly disintegrated.Historians generally date the end of the Western Empire to 476 AD. That's the year that Emperor Romulus Augustulus was deposed by the barbarian general Odoacer, who declared himself the King of Italy. But it's misleading to focus too much on any specific date. The last few emperors before Romulus Augustulus were increasingly emperors in name only. Starved of the tax revenues they needed to raise a serious military, their control over nominally Roman territory was increasingly tenuous. When Odoacer and other barbarian generals carved the Roman Empire up into kingdoms, they were largely just formalizing the de facto reality that the emperors had little actual power over their distant domains.This map looks dramatically different from the map of the Western Roman Empire as it existed a few decades earlier. But it's important not to overstate the extent of the change. Western Europe was populated by largely the same ethnic groups in 526 as they had been a century earlier. Long before it finally collapsed, manpower shortages had forced the empire to incorporate barbarian peoples into the legions. So the barbarian tribes who carved up the old empire — the Franks, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, the Vandals, and so forth — were much more Romanized than the tribes that had menaced Rome centuries earlier. The rulers of these new kingdoms generally sought to co-opt Roman elites that still held significant wealth and power across the former Western Empire. So while Romans certainly found it jarring to be suddenly ruled by outsiders, Western Europe in 526 was not so different from how it had been in 426.Historians generally refer to the Eastern Roman Empire after 476 as the Byzantine Empire. But this is an arbitrary distinction invented for the convenience of historians; it wouldn't have made sense to people living in Constantinople, the Eastern Capital, at the time. People in the Byzantine Empire continued to think of themselves as Romans, and their empire as the Roman Empire, for centuries after 476. In 527, the Emperor Justinian took power in the Byzantine Empire and began a campaign to reconquer the Western half of the empire. By his death in 565, he had made significant progress, retaking Italy, most of Roman Africa, and even some parts of Spain. While his successors wouldn't be able to hold these new territories, the Byzantine Empire would endure as a Christian empire for another thousand years, until it was finally overrun by the Ottomans in 1453.In 800 AD, Charlemagne, the king of the Franks, persuaded Pope Leo III to name him emperor, a title that hadn't been held in the West in three centuries. Charlemagne's successors built what came to be known as the Holy Roman Empire. Between 962 and 1806, it would control most of modern-day Germany and portions of modern-day France, Italy, and Central Europe. In practice, the Holy Roman Empire didn't have very much to do with the original Roman Empire. The empire was ruled by Germans rather than Italians, lacked traditional Roman institutions such as the Senate, and was more decentralized than the Roman Empire had been at its height. Still, the enthusiasm with which some of Europe's most powerful men claimed the mantle of the old Roman emperors is a sign of just how deep an impression Rome's accomplishments had left on later generations.After Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, religion and state were closely aligned — just as they had been under earlier pagan emperors. But that began to change after the Western Empire collapsed. Most of the barbarian kings who became the new masters of Western Europe were themselves Christians, and they recognized the authority of the church in Rome over religious matters. This set a precedent for the modern separation of church and state, and it allowed the church to thrive even as the Western Roman Empire crumbled. Indeed, popes began stepping into the power vacuum Rome had created. This map shows the papal states, sovereign territory that was governed by the popes from the 700s until secular Italian authorities annexed most of it in the 1800s. Today, the Catholic Church still operates in Latin from Vatican City, a tiny sovereign state inside the modern city of Rome.One of the most obvious ways Rome shaped the modern world is the languages people speak today. This map shows where people speak Romance languages such as Spanish, French, Italian, and Romanian that are descended from Latin. Notice that the line between the French-speaking and German-speaking parts of Europe looks a lot like the line between those portions of Europe that were conquered by the Romans and those that remained beyond the Roman frontier. The other notable thing about the map is that most people in what used to be the Eastern half of the Roman Empire do not speak Romance languages. That's because when Rome conquered the East, there was already a sophisticated civilization there based on the Greek language. While Latin became the language of government, commoners continued speaking Greek. And as the Western Roman Empire collapsed, Greek became the dominant tongue of the remaining Eastern provinces.Original developer Yuri VictorCorrection: The article originally stated that Constantinople fell in 1452. It actually fell in 1453. It originally stated that Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman empire, but he only began the process of Christianization. And it originally stated that triremes have three rowers per oar, but in fact they have three banks of oars, with one rower per oar. I also tweaked my description of quinqueremes. See More:



