

Chapter 6 Podcast Transcript

Imagine that you are a Roman Soldier in the year 218 BC. It is a chilly October day. You're stationed in Northern Italy, guarding the passes through the Alps. You're well aware that Hannibal, the commander-in-chief of Carthage, is marching his army toward Rome. The Roman Consul, Publius Cornelius Scipio, the Elder, tried to intercept Hannibal's army in southern Gaul (France), but Hannibal slipped through his grasp. Scipio moved his army back to Italy to await Hannibal's arrival. All that separated them, now, were the Alps—the tallest mountains in the known world. The Alps, and you, of course. And so you wait. Sipping a steaming cup of posca, a soldier's drink made of vinegar, water, and honey. Slowly, you notice a low vibration in the ground. Tendrils of dust sparkle in the autumn sun. Ripples form in your drink. The vibration grows louder. You climb to the top of a nearby rock. The sight before you takes your breath away. There, in all its terrible glory, is the army of Carthage. 30,000 soldiers. 15,000 cavalry. And, remarkably, 37 war elephants.

Carthage and Rome were the two great powers in the Mediterranean World in the 200s BC. According to tradition, the Roman Republic was established in the 500s BC. Located on the Italian Peninsula, Rome slowly expanded outward for several hundred years before conflict with Carthage began in earnest. Carthage began as a distant colony of the Phoenician city-state of Tyre. Located on the central coast of North Africa, across a narrow strait from Italy, Carthage was established in the 800s BC. By the 200s, Carthage controlled much of the western Mediterranean, including North Africa, Eastern Iberia (Spain), Corsica, Sardinia, and half of Sicily. The Mediterranean is a large body of water, but it was too small for the two expanding neighbors.

Carthage and Rome remained at war for the better part of a century, fighting a series of three wars known as the Punic Wars. The First Punic War began in 264 BC and focused on control over the island of Sicily and its surrounding waterways. It lasted for a remarkable 23 years, dealing devastating losses to both sides. Rome, not known for its naval strength, emerged victorious over the more experienced Carthaginians. The loss was humiliating for Carthage, which struggled to pay for the war and to maintain control over its far-flung territories. Rome took advantage of these challenges, further antagonizing Carthage.

One bright spot for the Carthaginians, though, was the general Hamilcar Barca. Hamilcar had led relatively successful campaigns during the First Punic War, and he helped Carthage put down rebellions in its aftermath. He then moved into Iberia, successfully expanding Carthage's domain before falling in battle. Hamilcar had several children, but one in particular took on the challenge of continuing his father's legacy, a legacy defined by distrust of the growing power of Rome. That son was Hannibal.

Hannibal's invasion of Italy stunned the Romans. His armies were exhausted by the arduous five-month long, one-thousand-mile journey from North Africa. Crossing the snowy Alps certainly didn't help. But Hannibal's armies were initially victorious, winning major battles in

each of the first three years of the war. In 216, Hannibal won his greatest victory at the Battle of Cannae, where skillful tactics allowed Carthage to encircle and annihilate a larger Roman army. The battle of Cannae remains one of the greatest victories in military history, and Hannibal's tactics are still studied in military science today.

Fighting a long war on foreign soil is difficult, though, and time began to take its toll. Rome regrouped and launched an invasion of Carthage itself, forcing Hannibal to return home for its defense. Under the leadership of Publius Cornelius Scipio, the son of the former Consul, Rome defeated Carthage on its own soil. Scipio returned a hero, taking the honorary nickname Africanus in celebration. We remember him as Scipio Africanus today.

Rome and its allies would continue to antagonize Carthage for almost 50 years, eventually driving it to rearm itself in contravention of peace treaties. Hardliners in the Roman Senate, like Cato the Elder, saw in this an excuse to destroy Carthage, once and for all. Rome invaded, besieged, and destroyed Carthage in 146 BC. The Roman Republic was quickly building a Roman Empire.

But all of this seemed very away, indeed, in 218 BC, as Hannibal and his army descended from the snowy Alps, war elephants in tow.

The Story of Rome is a Story of Transformation. How did a small town on the banks of the Tiber River grow to rule over the Mediterranean World, along with much of Western Europe, Britain, and part of the Middle East? How did that experience change Rome, and how did Rome change the world? What do we mean when we talk about the "Fall of Rome"? Are there lessons that we might still learn from this today?

The textbook traces the details of Rome's development, expansion, growth, and decline, so today we will focus a few critical questions about Roman history: Why Rome? Why did the Roman Republic become an Empire? What do we mean we talk about the "Fall of the Roman Empire"?

"Why Rome?" There's no single answer, of course. Climate, culture, economic development are all important factors. As we noted in East Asia, though, geography also plays a crucial role in history.

Rome has a rather unique location. Italy is narrow peninsula that juts into the Mediterranean Sea. No part of Italy, then, is very far from the sea. Northern Italy is surrounded by a tall mountain range known as the Alps, while another mountain range known as the Apennines follows the spine of the peninsula. These features provide protection from invasion over land (in most cases) while also making trade, transportation, and communication by water much easier. Rome itself was located at the ford—or crossing—of the Tiber River. This gave Rome the ability to control transportation by land and by water, and it provided the city with secure access to the sea—close enough for trade through the port of Ostia, but far enough away to

protect against piracy. Rome was also located in a hilly region—the first village was built on the top of seven hills—which provided additional security.

So, Rome benefited from unique physical geography. But it also benefited from unique cultural geography. Rome was bordered by two complex cultures that helped shape its development. In the North were the Etruscans—modern-day Tuscany—and in the south was a region known as Magna Grecia, because it was so heavily colonized by the Greeks. Though Rome maintained its political independence, these close neighbors dramatically shaped its culture, including its mythology, religion, architecture, system of writing, and urban planning.

All of these—combined with a favorable climate and central location—provided Rome with a remarkable opportunity for expansion and consolidation. When we study Rome, we often focus on two particular time periods—the birth of the Roman Empire and the collapse of the Roman Empire. Why did Rome become an Empire? To oversimplify things a bit, Rome was a victim of its own success.

Initially, Rome was a kingdom, ruled by kings. In Roman legend, the last of these kings, Tarquin the Proud, was expelled from Rome for his brutality. Monarchy was abolished for good measure. The process may have been more complicated in reality, but eventually Rome did settle on a republican form of government—one in which senators, assemblymen, and elected officials represented the interests of Rome's people. The Roman Republic was a very conservative state in which reverence for the past, for custom, for tradition, and for one's ancestors was held in very high regard. Reform was possible, but it had to be done in a way that respected the past. And reform was very much in demand at different points in Roman history. Roman society was divided into two distinct, defined classes. These included the Patricians, who were descended from the first 100 senators, and the Plebeians, who included everyone else. Many of the defining events in the history of the Roman Republic involved efforts by the Plebeians, or those claiming to speak for them, to address political and economic inequality.

As Rome expanded, these challenges became even more pronounced. Between approximately 250 BC and about 150 BC, Rome fought a series of major wars in both the Eastern and Western Mediterranean. In the East, Rome fought four wars with Macedonia—home of Alexander the Great several hundred years earlier—and ultimately conquered much of Greece. In the West, Rome fought three wars with Carthage, a former colony of the Phoenician civilization that was Rome's primary challenger for control of the seas. In 146 BC, Rome destroyed Carthage in the West and Corinth in Greece, cementing its place as the most powerful state in the Mediterranean World. As Rome expanded around the Mediterranean, it began to refer to the sea as *Mare Nostrum*—"Our Sea".

Conquering the Mediterranean is one thing. Governing it is an entirely different matter. Barely a decade after its stunning victories in Carthage and Corinth, Rome found itself plunged into social unrest and political violence—violence that would eventually lead to Civil War and the rise of the Empire. The textbook provides a detailed discussion of these challenges. Broadly

speaking, though, they shared an origin in the growing inequality of Rome. Much of Italy's fertile farmland was held by wealthy landowners, for example. And, though Rome had expanded dramatically, Roman citizenship had not. Beginning in the 130s BC, there were attempts to redistribute agricultural land and expand Roman citizenship, but these efforts antagonized Roman elites who were determined to hold on to economic and political power.

Ambitious leaders—particularly those with military backing—knew how to use these divisions to their benefit. The Roman Consul Gaius Marius is a great example of this. He was a “New Man” in Rome—someone not from an established political family. He was from a small town distant from Rome, too. He was elected consul—the chief executive position in Rome, similar to president—to put an end to a long, unsuccessful war with Numidia in North Africa. To do so, he transformed Rome's military. He opened it to Romans who didn't own land; he created a professional army that was available year-round; and he changed its tactics. The reforms worked. Marius defeated the Numidians and became enormously popular as a result. Although he wasn't supposed to serve as consul more than once per decade, he was elected for five consecutive terms. Each of these changes helped destabilize the rapidly changing, rapidly growing republic.

Despite Rome's (and Marius') victory in Africa, the same old challenges about citizenship and inequality continued to dominate Roman politics in the 100s BC. In the 90s BC, Rome's neighboring allies rose in rebellion demanding citizenship in the Republic; they were successful. In the 80s BC, Rome descended into civil war, with the consul Lucius Cornelius Sulla leading a Roman army in an assault on the city of Rome itself. In the 60s BC, ambitious political leaders like Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus developed secret alliances to bypass constitutional limits. As these alliances broke down, Rome descended into Civil War yet again. Like Marius before him, Julius Caesar used his own popularity as a military leader to institute dramatic political changes. This culminated with his decision to “cross the Rubicon,” or lead his army into Roman territory. He would eventually be declared dictator for life. After his assassination by Roman Senators, Rome would be plunged into a series of Civil Wars. In the end, Caesar's adopted son and heir Octavian would seize control, retitling himself Caesar Augustus, and consolidate all offices and powers permanently in his own hands—without ever declaring himself king. The Roman Republic was dead. The Roman Empire was born.

We could dedicate an entire semester to talking about the Roman Republic and Empire—indeed, many colleges do, and I recommend seeking out those classes. What happened to Rome, though? Was there really a “Fall of Rome?” Yes and no. Germanic peoples like the Visigoths, Ostrogoths, and Vandals did move into the Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth century AD—sometimes by invitation and sometimes by invasion. The Visigoths did sack the city of Rome in 410 AD. This was a shocking event without precedence in the previous SEVEN HUNDRED YEARS. When the Christian Saint Augustine wrote the City of God shortly thereafter, it was to remind shocked Roman Christians that they should place their faith in the eternal City

of God rather than the sinful, fallen, City of Man. In 476 AD the last Roman Emperor, Romulus Augustulus, really was deposed by Odovacar and his Gothic allies.

All of these are true. But Roman civilization, culture, and government survived in the eastern half of the former Roman Empire. During the tumultuous 200s and 300s AD, the Roman emperor Diocletian divided the empire into Eastern and Western sections. Although the division would not last, it reflected the different economic and geographic interests of the two regions. His successor, Constantine, established a new capital for the Roman Empire in the East, the city of Constantinople. You probably know Constantine as the first Roman emperor to legalize Christianity and ultimately confess the faith for himself. The city of Constantinople occupied a strategic location where the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea meet. There was an old Greek city in the location known as Byzantium, so we often refer to this empire as the Byzantine Empire after the Fall of Rome in 476 AD. But the “Byzantines” saw themselves as Roman, even though their culture and language was perhaps more Greek in influence. But the Byzantine Empire would survive for another THOUSAND years, ending only when the Ottoman Turks captured the city of Constantinople in 1453 AD.

We’ll return to these topics many times in this class. The Byzantine Empire will play a crucial role in the Middle Ages and during the Crusades, and the Fall of Constantinople will cause a flood of scholarship, literature, and knowledge into wealthy Italy—fueling the Renaissance in the very ruins of the Roman Empire.