



CHAPTER 6
The Creation of the Roman Empire
44 B.C.E.–284 C.E.



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Cameo Celebrating Augustus On this nine-inch-wide cameo, the woman and man seated together are Livia and Augustus, the first “Roman Emperor” (r. 27 B.C.E.–14 C.E.). Livia is shown as Juno, queen of the gods, or Minerva, goddess of wisdom. A figure representing the Inhabited World crowns Augustus for saving Roman citizens by his leadership in war. Their appearing together emphasizes Livia’s partnership with her husband in protecting the Roman people. The man stepping from a chariot at the left is probably Tiberius, their son, Livia’s biological son whom Augustus adopted. Below, Roman soldiers dominate captured foreigners and erect a victory monument.



CHAPTER PREVIEW



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From Republic to Empire, 44 B.C.E.–14 C.E.

How did the peace established by Augustus's "restoration of the Roman republic" affect Romans' lives in all social classes?

Politics and Society in the Early Roman Empire

In the early Roman Empire, what was life like in the cities and in the country for the elite and for ordinary people?

The Emergence of Christianity in the Early Roman Empire

Which aspects of social, cultural, and political life in the early Roman Empire supported the growth of Christianity, and which opposed it?

From Stability to Crisis in the Third Century C.E.

What were the causes and the effects of the Roman crisis in the third century C.E. ?

In 203 C.E., Vibia Perpetua, wealthy and twenty-two years old, sat locked in a Carthage jail, nursing her infant. She along with other Christians had been condemned to death for treason after refusing to sacrifice to the gods for the Roman emperor's health and safety. Perpetua reportedly had this conversation with the local governor when he tried to persuade her to save her life:





My father came carrying my son, shouting “Perform the sacrifice; take pity on your baby!” Then the governor said, “Think of your old father; show pity for your little child! Offer the sacrifice for the imperial family’s well being.” “I refuse,” I answered. “Are you a Christian?” asked the governor. “Yes.” When my father would not stop trying to change my mind, the governor ordered him thrown to the earth and whipped with a rod. I felt sorry for my father; it seemed they were beating me. I pitied his pathetic old age.

Gored by a wild cow and stabbed by a gladiator, Perpetua died because she valued her faith above her family and the state.

Rome’s rulers during what we call the Roman Empire punished disloyalty because it threatened to reignite the civil wars that had destroyed the Roman republic. The refusal of some Christians such as Perpetua to perform traditional sacrifice was considered treason because Romans believed the gods would punish them for sheltering people who refused to worship the ancient deities and rejected traditional religious beliefs.

Internal conflict among Romans was a cause of anxiety for the Empire’s first rulers because the transformation from republic to empire opened with seventeen years of civil war following Julius Caesar’s death in 44 B.C.E. With internal peace finally restored, in 27 B.C.E. Caesar’s adopted son, Octavian (thereafter known as Augustus), declared that he had restored the republic; in reality, he created a



Augustus), declared that he had restored the republic; in reality, he created a disguised monarchy. Augustus's new system retained traditional institutions for sharing power — the Senate, the consuls, the courts — but in reality he and his successors governed like kings ruling an Empire. (See [Terms of History](#) on page 196.)

The fear of internal war gradually receded as Augustus's innovations brought peace for two hundred years, except for a struggle between generals for rule in 69 C.E. This [Pax Romana](#) (“**Roman Peace**”) allowed agriculture, trade, and intercultural interaction to grow in the provinces, but paying for the military eventually weakened Rome. Previously, foreign wars had won Romans huge amounts of land and money, but now the distances were too great and the enemies too strong. The army was no longer an offensive weapon for expansion bringing in new taxes but instead was a defense force that had to be paid for out of existing revenues. The financial strain drained the treasury and destabilized the government. Christianity emerged as a new religion that would slowly transform the Roman world, but it also created tension because the growing presence of Christians made other Romans worry about punishment from the gods. In the third century C.E., the always-present fear that Romans would literally battle Romans for political prominence proved accurate when generals competing to rule reignited civil war that lasted fifty years and finally precipitated political change.



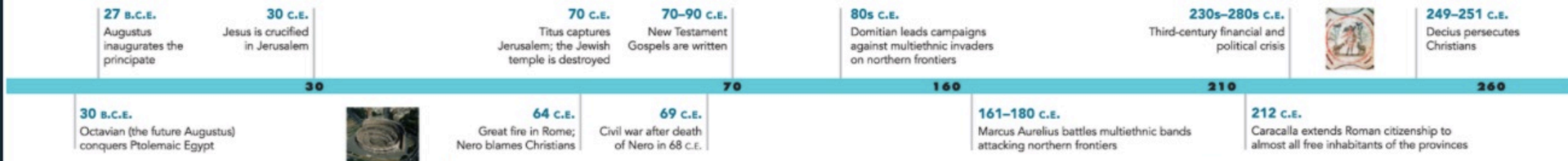
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CHAPTER TIMELINE



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CHAPTER TIMELINE



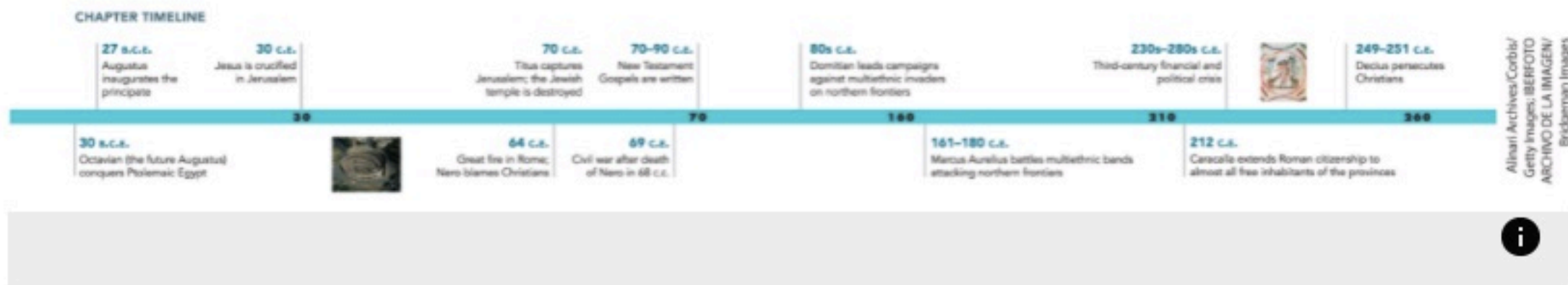
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orders to others; failure to comply would bring punishment, up to the death penalty. Originally the kings of Rome and then a small number of high-ranking magistrates under the republic held this power; later, the emperors possessed a "greater *imperium*."

This power had its roots in military discipline; commanders vested with it could execute disobedient soldiers in the field. Governors of provinces exercised this power within the boundaries of their assigned territory. In Rome itself, citizens could not be summarily put to death because they had a legal right of appeal.



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TERMS OF HISTORY

Empire

The term *empire* comes from the Latin word *imperium*, which referred to the supreme power to give orders to others; failure to comply would bring punishment, up to the death penalty. Originally the kings of Rome and then a small number of high-ranking magistrates under the republic held this power; later, the emperors possessed a “greater *imperium*.”

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In the mid-first century B.C.E., when the republic was being torn apart by factional conflict finally erupting into civil war, it became possible to vote “infinite *imperium*” for a leader, giving him power to command in any part of the world outside the city. It was in this same period that the word began to be used in the modern sense of “empire,” to indicate domination of lands and peoples outside

to command in any part of the world outside the city. It was in this same period that the word began to be used in the modern sense of “empire,” to indicate domination of lands and peoples outside one’s original territory.

In fact, the Roman republic had begun to amass an empire in this sense already in the third century B.C.E., following the First Punic War, and then continued to acquire domination over non-Roman territories. So, the Romans’ acquisition of an empire preceded what we today call the Roman Empire.

This Roman Empire involved domination of a vast extent of non-Roman peoples and territories. Some of these regions were relatively peaceful under Roman control, while others could be more rebellious. Historians have not agreed about the Romans’ primary motivation in fighting wars — and engaging in diplomacy — to construct their empire. Were they acting out of a perceived need to establish a defensive frontier abroad to protect their homeland, on the principle that “the best defense is a good offense”? Or were they intent on exploiting others by seizing war spoils and imposing taxes on areas converted into provinces?

Romans moved into many of these areas, bringing their own culture with them. Scholars often use the term *Romanization* to describe the interactions that transpired between the conquerors and the conquered. As with the debate over the meaning of the changes that took place during the earlier Hellenistic Age, scholars have strongly disagreed over whether to see this process as beneficial or oppressive. The modern term *imperialism*, another coinage from *imperium*, refers to the oppression of other peoples dominated by another state. Recent research presents a more nuanced interpretation of the effects of empire without excusing conquest, for example by uncovering the negotiations over power that constantly took place between the powerful and the less powerful in the imperial system, and the need to build some level of cooperation through the “imperialists” allowing local cultures and religions to continue, while at the same time requiring demonstrations of loyalty by worship in the cult of the emperor in the provinces.



CHAPTER FOCUS

How did Augustus's "restored republic" successfully keep the peace for more than two centuries, and why did it fail in the third century?



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From Republic to Empire, 44 B.C.E.–14 C.E.

It takes time to invent the future. Augustus created his political system gradually, following his favorite saying, he “made haste slowly.” He succeeded because he reinvented government, guaranteed the army’s support, unhesitatingly used violence to win power, and built political legitimacy by communicating an image of himself as a dedicated leader and patron. By declaring his respect for tradition and establishing his disguised monarchy as Rome’s political system, he saved the state from anarchy. Succeeding where Caesar had failed, Augustus preserved his power by making the new look old; old was what traditional Roman values enshrined as best.

Civil War, 44–27 B.C.E.

The main competitors in the civil war after Julius Caesar’s death were Octavian (the future Augustus), Caesar’s eighteen-year-old grandnephew and adopted son, and Mark Antony, a friend of Caesar. Octavian won over Caesar’s soldiers by promising



Mark Antony, a friend of Caesar. Octavian won over Caesar's soldiers by promising them money he had inherited from his adoptive father. Marching this army to Rome, the teenage Octavian forced the Senate to make him consul in 43 B.C.E., disregarding the ladder of offices.

Octavian and Mark Antony joined with a general named Lepidus to eliminate rivals. In 43 B.C.E., they formed the Second Triumvirate to reorganize the government. They murdered many of their enemies, including some of their own relatives, and seized their property.

Octavian and Antony then forced Lepidus out and fought each other in a struggle that roiled the Roman world. Recent scientific research on Arctic ice cores has revealed that the situation grew even more difficult for the population at large when a thick dust cloud from a giant volcanic eruption 6,000 miles away in the Aleutian Islands darkened the skies over Europe. Temperatures dropped, putting environmental stress on agriculture that reduced essential food production.

Abandoning Italy in this desperate period, Antony strengthened his position by allying with Queen Cleopatra VII (69–30 B.C.E.), the ruler of Egypt who had earlier allied with Julius Caesar. Dazzled by her intelligence and magnetism, Antony, who was married to Octavian's sister, fell in love with Cleopatra. (See [Contrasting Views in Chapter 4](#).) Together they gained control of the provinces that Romans had



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[in Chapter 4.](#)) Together they gained control of the provinces that Romans had acquired in the eastern Mediterranean. Octavian rallied support by claiming that Antony planned to make this foreign queen Rome's ruler. He made the residents of Italy and the western provinces swear an oath of allegiance to him. Octavian's victory in the naval battle of Actium in northwest Greece in 31 B.C.E. won the war. Cleopatra and Antony fled to Egypt, where they both committed suicide in 30 B.C.E. The general Mark Antony first stabbed himself, bleeding to death in his lover's embrace. Cleopatra then ended her life by allowing a poisonous snake to bite her, to prevent Octavian from displaying her in a victory parade (a "triumph") back in Rome. Octavian's revenues from the capture of Egypt made him Rome's richest citizen.

The Creation of the Principate, 27 B.C.E.–14 C.E.

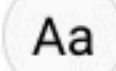
In 27 B.C.E., Octavian proclaimed that he "gave back the state from [his] own power to the control of the Roman Senate and the people" and announced they should decide how to preserve it. Recognizing Octavian's power, the senators asked him to safeguard the state, granted him special civil and military powers, and bestowed on him the honorary title [Augustus](#), meaning "divinely favored."

Augustus changed Rome's political system, but he retained the name *republic* and maintained the appearance of traditional government in what is today called the



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maintained the appearance of traditional government in what is today called the Roman Empire. Citizens elected consuls, the Senate gave advice, and the assemblies met. Augustus occasionally served as consul, but mostly he let others hold that office so they could enjoy its prestige. He concealed his monarchy by referring to himself only with the honorary title *princeps*, meaning “first man” (among social equals), a term of status from the republic. The Romans used the Latin word *princeps* to describe the position that we call emperor, and so the Roman government in the early empire after 27 B.C.E. is most accurately labeled the *principate*. Each new princeps was supposed to be chosen only with the Senate’s approval, but in practice each ruler chose his own successor, in the way a royal family decides who will be king. To preserve the tradition that no official should hold more than one post at a time, Augustus as princeps had the Senate grant him the powers, though not the office, of a tribune. In 23 B.C.E., the Senate agreed that Augustus should also have a consul’s power to command (*imperium*): in fact, his power would be superior to that held by the actual consuls.

Holding the power of a tribune and a power even greater than a consul’s meant that Augustus could rule the state without filling any formal executive political office. Augustus insisted that people obeyed him not out of fear but out of respect for his *auctoritas* (“authority”). Since Augustus realized that symbols affect people’s perception of reality, he dressed and acted modestly, like a regular citizen, not an



perception of reality, he dressed and acted modestly, like a regular citizen, not an arrogant king. Livia, his wife, played a prominent role as his political adviser and partner in publicly upholding old-fashioned values — despite their having earlier started a love affair while she was still married to another man and also pregnant, as was Augustus's wife at the time. In fact, Augustus and the emperors who came after him were able to exercise supreme power because they controlled the army and the treasury. Later Roman emperors held the same power but continued to refer to the state as the republic; the senators and the consuls continued to exist, and the rulers continued to pretend to respect them.

Augustus made the military the foundation of the emperor's power by turning the republic's citizen militia into a professional, full-time army and navy. He established regular lengths of service and retirement benefits, making the emperor the troops' patron to solidify their loyalty to him. To pay the added costs, Augustus imposed Rome's first inheritance tax on citizens, angering the rich. He also stationed several thousand soldiers in Rome for the first time ever. This change had a major political effect: these soldiers — the **praetorian guard** — would later play a crucial role in selecting the next emperor when the current one died. Augustus meant them to provide security for him and prevent rebellion in the capital by serving as a visible reminder that the superiority of the princeps was backed by the threat of armed force. Civil freedom was never the same once the leader could use soldiers against citizens.

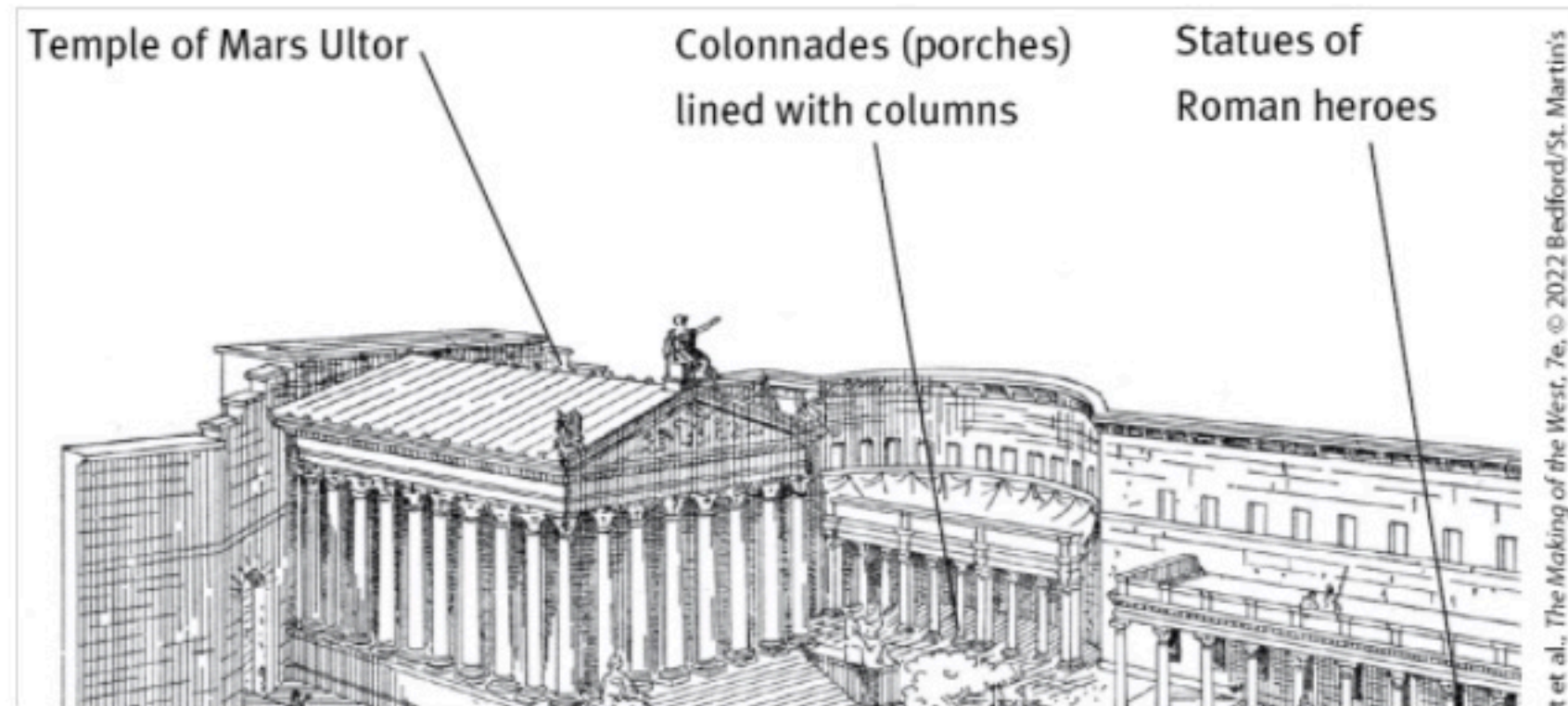


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Augustus did use his personal fortune to erect spectacular public buildings in Rome to benefit people as a whole. The huge Forum of Augustus, dedicated in 2 B.C.E., best illustrates his skill at communicating messages through architecture ([Figure 6.1](#)). This public gathering space centered on a temple to Mars, the god of war. Two-story colonnades held statues of famous Roman heroes to serve as inspirations to the young. Augustus's forum hosted religious rituals and the coming-of-age ceremonies of upper-class boys. As a symbol, it demonstrated his justifications for ruling: a new age of peace and security through military power, devotion to the gods protecting Rome, respect for tradition, and generosity in spending money on public works.



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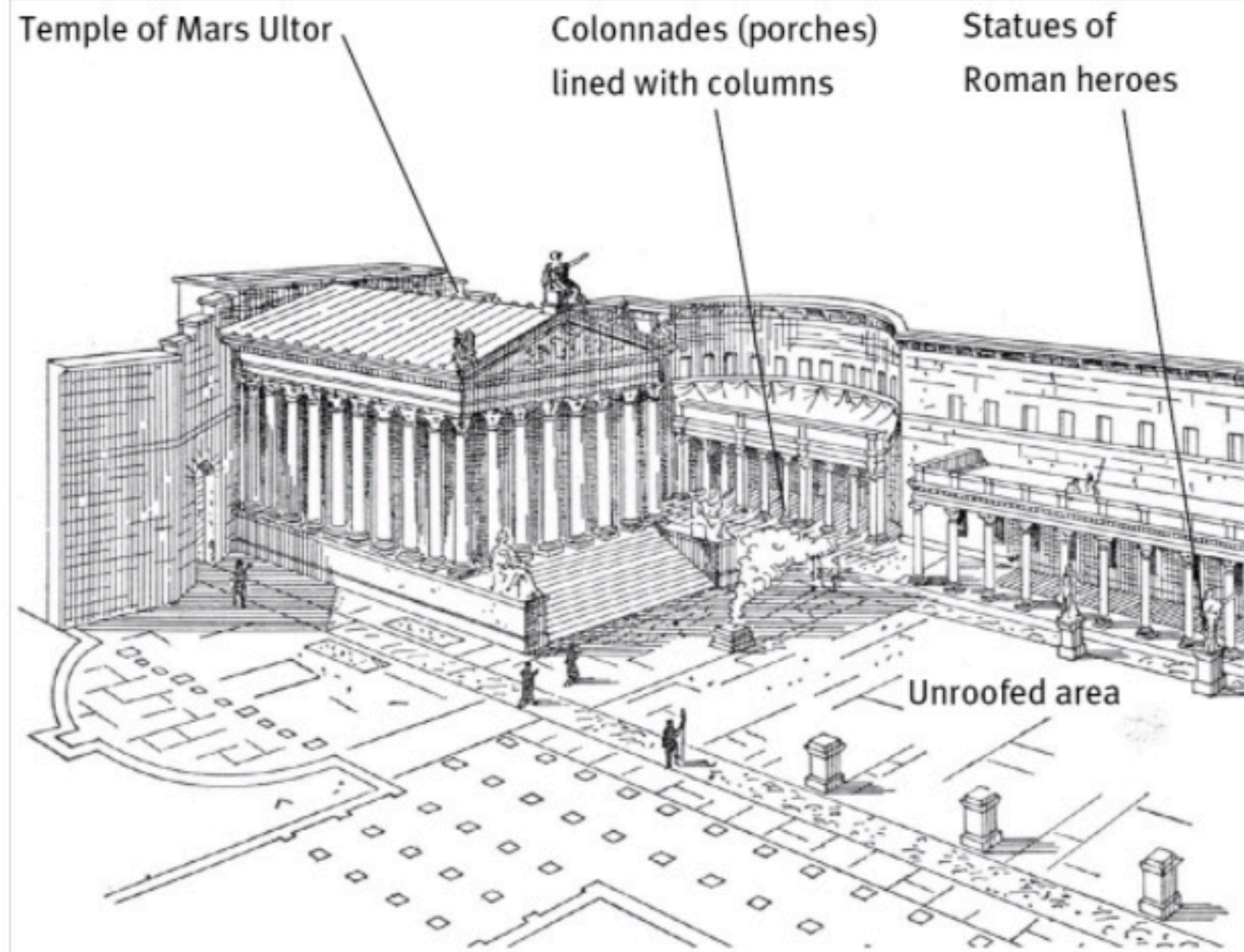


FIGURE 6.1 Cutaway Reconstruction of the Forum of Augustus

Augustus built this large forum 120 × 90 yards to commemorate his victory over the assassins of Julius Caesar. The centerpiece was a marble temple to Mars Ultor ("Mars the Avenger"), and inside the temple were statues of Mars,



FIGURE 6.1 Cutaway Reconstruction of the Forum of Augustus

Augustus built this large forum 120 × 90 yards to commemorate his victory over the assassins of Julius Caesar. The centerpiece was a marble temple to Mars Ultor (“Mars the Avenger”), and inside the temple were statues of Mars, Venus (the divine ancestor of Julius Caesar), and Julius Caesar (as a god), as well as works of art and Caesar’s sword. The two spaces flanking the temple featured statues of Aeneas and Romulus, Rome’s founders. The high stone wall behind the temple protected it from fire, a constant threat in the crowded neighborhood behind.



Augustus used the paternalism of the patron-client system to make the princeps everyone’s most important patron, possessing the authority to guide their lives. When in 2 B.C.E. the Senate and the people proclaimed Augustus “Father of His Country,” the title emphasized that the emperor governed like a father: stern but caring, expecting obedience and loyalty from his children, and taking care of them in return. The goal was stability and order, not freedom.

Augustus constantly promoted his image as patron and public benefactor. He used media as small as coins and as large as buildings. As a mass-produced medium for official messages, Roman coins functioned like modern political advertising. They proclaimed slogans such as “Father of His Country” or “Roads have been built.”





Augustus ruled until his death at age seventy-five in 14 C.E. As the historian Tacitus (c. 56–120 C.E.) remarked, by the time Augustus died after a reign of forty-one years, “almost no one was still alive who had seen the republic.” Augustus’s longevity, military innovations, support for the masses, and manipulation of political symbols had allowed him to create the Roman Empire.

Daily Life in the Rome of Augustus

In Augustan Rome’s population of nearly one million, many could not find regular jobs and often had too little to eat. The streets were packed: “One man jabs me with his elbow, another whacks me with a pole; my legs are smeared with mud, and big feet step on me from all sides,” one poet wrote of walking in Rome. To ease congestion in the narrow streets, the city banned wagons in the daytime.

Most residents lived in small apartments in multistoried buildings called islands. The first floors housed shops, bars, and restaurants. The higher the floor, the cheaper the rent. The wealthy, who lived at ground level, had piped-in water. The less fortunate had to fill water jugs at public fountains, to which aqueducts delivered fresh water, and then lug the heavy jugs up the stairs. Most people had to use public latrines or keep buckets for toilets at home and then carry the waste down to the streets for sewage collectors. Sanitation was a problem in this city that



down to the streets for sewage collectors. Sanitation was a problem in this city that generated sixty tons of human waste daily; the municipal sewer had to be enlarged (see [Environment Matters on page 171 in Chapter 5](#)). Also, poor people often left human and animal corpses in the streets, to be gnawed by birds and dogs. Flies and no refrigeration contributed to frequent gastrointestinal ailments.

However, low fees for public baths meant that almost everyone could bathe regularly. Baths were standard in Roman towns as centers for exercising and socializing. Bathers progressed through a series of increasingly warm areas until they reached a sauna-like room. They swam naked in their choice of either hot or cold pools. Men and women bathed separately.

Augustus improved public safety and health. He instituted the first public fire department in Western history. He also established Rome's first permanent police force. Roman architects built public structures with brick, stone, and concrete that lasted centuries; the cement used for underwater construction in harbors was better than anything available today. Still, also like the present, contractors sometimes cheated on materials for private building, causing apartment complexes to collapse. Augustus imposed a maximum height of seventy feet on multistory buildings to limit the danger.

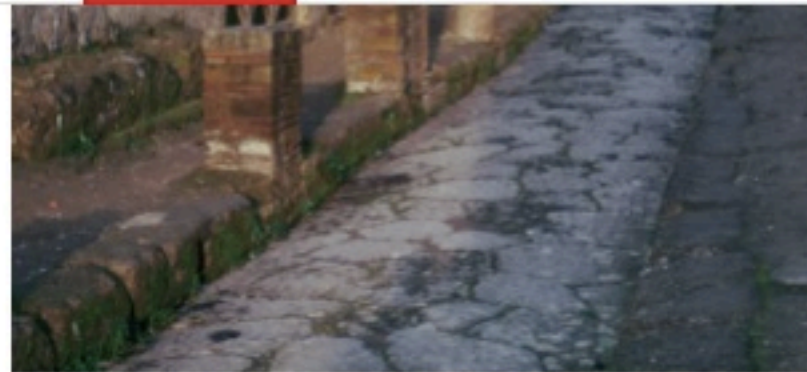




Old Daron/Print Collector/Hubton Archive/Getty Images

A Roman Street Like Pompeii, the town of Herculaneum on the Bay of Naples was frozen in time by the volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 c. e. Mud from the eruption buried the town and preserved its buildings. Herculaneum's straight roads paved with flat stones and sidewalks were typical for a Roman town. Balconies jutted from the houses, offering a shady viewing point for life in the streets. Roman houses often enclosed a garden courtyard instead of





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As the people's patron, Augustus paid for grain to feed the poor, upping the government's distribution of food to 250,000 heads of households. From this grain, people made bread or soup, adding beans, leeks, or cheeses if they could afford them; they washed down these meals with cheap wine. The rich ate more costly food, such as roast pork or seafood with honey and vinegar sauce.

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Wealthy Romans increasingly spent money on luxuries and political careers instead of raising families. They splurged on luxuries such as snow rushed from the mountains to ice their drinks and slaves to clean their houses, which were built around courtyards and gardens. Fearing the falling birthrate would destroy the social upper level on which Rome relied for public service, Augustus granted privileges to the parents of three or more children. He criminalized adultery, even exiling his own daughter — his only child — and a granddaughter for sex scandals. His legislation failed, however, and the prestigious old families dwindled over time. With each generation, three-quarters of senatorial families lost their official status by either spending all their money and therefore not being able to show that they still possessed the amount of wealth required to maintain their senatorial rank or by dying off without having children. The emperors filled the many places that came open in the Senate with equites and provincials.

Since imperial Rome still gave citizenship to freed slaves, all slaves hoped someday to gain that status, regardless of how they had originally become enslaved (by being captured in war, stolen from their home region by slave traders, or born to slave women as the owner's property). Freed slaves' descendants, if they became wealthy, could become members of the social elite. This policy of giving citizenship to freed slaves meant that over time most Romans descended from slave ancestors.



The harshness of slaves' lives varied widely. Slaves in agriculture and manufacturing had a grueling existence, while household slaves lived more comfortably. Modestly prosperous families owned one or two slaves, while rich houses and the imperial palace commanded huge staffs. Domestic slaves were often women, working as nurses, maids, kitchen helpers, and clothes makers. Some male slaves ran businesses for their masters and were often allowed to keep part of the profits, which they could save to purchase their freedom. Women had less opportunity to earn money, though masters sometimes granted tips for sexual favors to both female and male slaves. Many female prostitutes were slaves working for their owners in a brothel. Slaves with savings would sometimes buy other slaves, especially to have a spouse; they were barred from legal marriage, because they and their children remained their master's property, but they could live as a shadow family. Some masters' tomb inscriptions express affection for a slave, but if slaves attacked their owner, the punishment was death.

Violence featured in much of Roman public entertainment. The emperors provided shows featuring hunters killing wild beasts, animals mangling condemned criminals, mock naval battles in flooded arenas, gladiatorial combats, and wreck-filled chariot races. Spectators were seated according to their social rank and gender. The emperor, senators, and Vestal Virgins were honored with favorable seats, while other women and the poor sat in the upper tiers.



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Criminals and slaves could be forced to fight as gladiators, but free people also voluntarily competed, hoping to become celebrities and win prizes. Most gladiators were men, though women could fight other women until such matches were banned around 200 C.E. Gladiators were often wounded or killed in the fights, but their contests rarely required a fight to the death, unless they were captives or criminals. To make the bouts unpredictable, pairs of gladiators often competed with different weapons. One favorite match pitted a lightly armored “net man” with a net and a trident against a heavily armored “fish man,” so named from his helmet design. Betting was popular, and the crowds were rowdy.



Mosaic, Leptis Magna, Libya/photo © Gilles Mermet/Art Resource, NY.

Gladiator after a Kill This first-century C.E. mosaic covered a villa floor in North Africa. It shows a gladiator staring



Gladiator after a Kill This first-century C.E. mosaic covered a villa floor in North Africa. It shows a gladiator staring at the opponent he has just killed. What feelings do you think his expression conveys? Gladiatorial combats originated as part of wealthy people's funeral ceremonies, symbolizing the human struggle to avoid death. Training an expert gladiator took many years and great expense. Like boxers today, gladiators fought only a couple of times a year. Because it cost so much to replace a dead gladiator, most fights were not to the death intentionally; kills did happen, however, in the fury of combat.



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Public entertainment supported communication between the ruler and the ruled. Emperors provided gladiatorial combats, chariot races, and theater productions for the masses, and ordinary citizens staged protests at them to express their wishes. Poor Romans regularly rioted to protest shortfalls in the free grain supply.

Changes in Education, Literature, and Art in Augustus's Rome

Elite culture changed in the Augustan period to serve the same goal as public entertainment: legitimizing the transformed but disguised political system. Orators skilled in persuasive public speaking lost their freedom of expression, as did artists. Under the republic, the ability to criticize political opponents in speeches had been such a powerful weapon that it could catapult a "new man" like Cicero (see [Chapter 5](#)) to a leadership role. Now, the emperor's dominance limited frank political debate or subversive art. Criticism of the ruler became very dangerous.

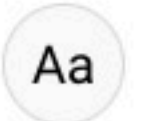




With no public schools, only wealthy Romans received formal education. Most people learned only through working. As a character in a novel said, “I didn’t study geometry and literary criticism and worthless junk like that. I just learned how to read the letters on signs and how to work out percentages, and I learned weights, measures, and the values of the different kinds of coins.” Rich boys and girls attended private elementary schools to learn reading, writing, and arithmetic. Some went on to study literature, history, and grammar. Only a few male students then proceeded to study advanced literature and history, rhetoric, ethical philosophy, law, and dialectic (reasoned argument). (See [Primary Source Analysis](#).) Mathematics and science were rarely studied as separate subjects, but engineers and architects became proficient at calculation. Highly educated Romans became fluently bilingual in Greek to supplement their native language, Latin.

Scholars call the Augustan period the Golden Age of Latin literature. The emperor was the patron for writers and artists. Augustus’s favorite authors were Horace (65–8 B.C.E.) and Virgil (70–19 B.C.E.). Horace’s poem celebrating Augustus’s victory at Actium became a favorite for its opening line: “Now it’s time to drink!” Virgil’s epic poem *The Aeneid* became Rome’s most famous work of literature. Inspired by Homer, Virgil told the drama-filled story of the Trojan Aeneas, whom the Romans regarded as their heroic ancestor, as he established a community in Italy after fleeing from the burning ruins of his home city. Virgil balanced his praise for Roman civilization with the acknowledgment that its peace existed at the cost of





Roman civilization with the acknowledgment that its peace existed at the cost of freedom.

Livy (54 B.C.E.–17 C.E.) wrote a history of Rome recording Augustus’s ruthlessness in the civil war after Caesar’s murder. The emperor scolded but did not punish him, because Livy’s work proclaimed that stability and prosperity depended on traditional values of loyalty and self-sacrifice. The poet Ovid (43 B.C.E.–17 C.E.), however, wrote *Art of Love* and *Love Affairs* to mock the emperor’s moral legislation with snarky advice on sexual affairs and adultery. Ovid’s work *Metamorphoses* undermined the idea of natural hierarchy with stories of supernatural shape-changes, with people becoming animals and mixing the human and the divine. Augustus exiled the poet in 8 B.C.E. for his alleged involvement in the scandal involving the emperor’s granddaughter.

Augustus used sculpture and architecture to project a calm and competent image of himself as the “Restorer of the Roman Republic” and founder of a new age for Rome. His elaborate building called the “Altar of Peace” (*Ara Pacis*) displayed relief sculptures showing Roman legends and also depictions of his family and other elite Romans that expressed his claim to have given Romans back a blessed existence under the protection of the gods.





DEA/G. DAGLI ORTI/De Agostini/Getty Images.

Proclaiming Peace on Augustus's Altar of Peace in Rome This relief sculpture decorated an external wall of the Altar of Peace that the Roman Senate commissioned to honor Augustus, the "first man of Rome." Completed in 9 B.C.E., the altar's decoration proclaimed Augustus's claim to be the protector of hallowed Roman tradition — the "way of the ancestors" and the author of peace. This proclamation sought to give legitimacy to his regime, a





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PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS

A Roman Stoic Philosopher on the Capabilities of Women

Musonius Rufus was a Roman philosopher in the first century C.E. who lectured (in Greek) on Stoicism as “the science of living.” His ideas were regarded as subversive enough to be threatening to those in power: two different emperors expelled him from Rome, hoping to eliminate his influence. These excerpts reveal his views on the natural capacities of women, education in philosophy, and marriage.

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Musonius Rufus was a Roman philosopher in the first century c.e. who lectured (in Greek) on Stoicism as “the science of living.” His ideas were regarded as subversive enough to be threatening to those in power: two different emperors expelled him from Rome, hoping to eliminate his influence. These excerpts reveal his views on the natural capacities of women, education in philosophy, and marriage.

The gods have given women the same ability to use their minds as men.... Women as well as men have an eagerness and a natural tendency towards excellence (virtue).... Therefore, why is it proper for men to investigate and examine to live rightly, that is, to study philosophy and live by its guidance, but not for women? Is it appropriate for men to be good, but not women?

To begin with, a woman must manage her household and pick out what is helpful for her home and take charge of the household slaves. I claim that philosophy is especially helpful for these actions, since each of them is a part of life, and philosophy is nothing other than the science of living.... Next, a woman must be chaste, and capable of keeping herself free from illegal love affairs, and pure in other self-indulgent pleasures. She must not delight in quarreling, not be extravagant, or overly concerned with her appearance.... She must control her anger, and not be overcome by grief, and stronger than every kind of emotion....

It is easy to recognize that there are not different types of excellences for men and women. First, men and women both need to have common sense.... Second, both need to live just lives. An unjust man can not be a good citizen, and a woman can not run her household well, if she does not run it justly.... Third, a wife ought to be chaste, and so should a husband, for the laws punish both sides in cases of adultery....





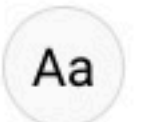
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You might argue that only men need courage, but that is false. The best sort of woman must have the courage of a man and purge herself of cowardice, so that she will not give in to suffering or fear. If she can't do that, then how can she be chaste, if someone by threatening her or torturing her can force her to act disgracefully? ... That women are able to use weapons, we know from the Amazons, who fought many peoples in battle....

It is reasonable, then, for me to think that women should be educated like men concerning excellence, and they must be taught, beginning in their childhood, that this is good and that is bad, and that they are the same for both genders, and that this is beneficial and that harmful, and that an individual must do this, and not do that. Such lessons develop reasoning in both girls and boys, and there is no distinction between them....

[In marriage], husband and wife join together to live their lives in common and to have children.... They should consider all their property to be shared, and nothing to belong only to themselves, not even their bodies.... There must be complete companionship and concern for each other by both husband and wife, in health and in sickness and at all times, because they entered upon the marriage for this reason, as well as to have children. When such caring for one another is perfect, and the married couple provide it for each another, and each works to outdo the other, then this is marriage as it ought to be.... But when one partner looks to their own interests alone and neglects the other's concerns ... or is unwilling to pull together with their partner or to cooperate, then inevitably the marriage is destroyed, and although the two live together, their common interests do poorly, and finally they get a divorce, or they live on in an existence that is worse than loneliness.





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Source: Musonius Rufus 3, 4, 13A, Lutz edition. Translation by Thomas R. Martin.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What arguments does the Stoic philosopher make about the benefits of women studying philosophy?
2. How do you think the philosopher's apparent assumptions about differences between women and men affected his arguments?

REVIEW QUESTION

How did the peace gained through Augustus's "restoration of the Roman republic" affect Romans' lives in all social classes?

