

Name _____ Date _____

The Roman Empire

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

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Notes

Born in 100 BCE to an aristocratic family, Julius Caesar went on to become one of the most influential figures in Roman history. The Caesars were patricians, or members of the Roman ruling class, who traced their ancestry back to the city's founding. They even claimed to be descended from Venus, the Roman goddess of love and beauty.

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As a young man, Caesar demonstrated strong leadership and oratory skills, winning military honors for his courage in battle and becoming a successful prosecutor in the Roman courts. His political career began shortly after, and he rose from quaestor the lowest-ranking public office in ancient Rome to provincial governor within about a decade. As governor, he raised an army that conquered much of Western Europe, earning him a reputation as a brilliant military strategist. But back home, Roman leaders were becoming increasingly concerned about Caesar's growing power. When they ordered him to return to Rome, Caesar refused, inciting a civil war that he eventually won.

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Having emerged triumphant, Caesar was appointed dictator of Rome. He instituted a series of populist reforms, including increasing the size of the Senate, overhauling the tax code, and creating the Julian calendar the one we still use today. But his efforts to achieve absolute power ended in 46 BCE, when a group of senators assassinated him.

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With its iconic limestone columns and large domed windows, the Colosseum is one of the world's most recognizable buildings. It's also the oldest standing amphitheater in existence. Vespasian, the first emperor of the Flavian dynasty, commissioned the Colosseum around 70 CE as a gift to the people of Rome and a symbol of the empire's power. Most of the construction was performed by enslaved people, with some specialized tasks carried out by professional Roman engineers and artists. Upon its completion in 80 CE, the massive structure could hold more than 50,000 spectators at maximum capacity.

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During its 500 years of active use, the Colosseum often hosted gladiator events. Gladiators were armed fighters who dueled with wild animals, people convicted of crimes, and other gladiators. The battles were brutal but wildly popular with the Roman public. Even emperors were frequently in attendance. Additionally, the Colosseum was used for historical reenactments, theatrical performances, and public executions.

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Eventually, interest in gladiatorial games waned, and the Colosseum fell into obscurity. Centuries of looting and natural disasters left the structure in a state of disrepair, but restoration efforts have helped to recreate much of it. Today, it's one of the most popular tourist attractions in Italy, with over six million visitors every year.

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Though the fall of Rome marked the end of the empire's western half, the eastern portion thrived for another thousand years. Today, historians refer to it as the Byzantine Empire, a nod to the key port city of Byzantium that became the empire's capital, Constantinople. Constantine, the first Byzantine emperor, chose the location of his namesake city strategically. It was close to the geographical center of the empire and surrounded almost entirely by water, making it easy to defend. The city quickly grew into a medieval metropolis as Constantine commissioned major public works projects and lured the empire's wealthiest with promises of free land. Notably, Constantine also made Christianity the official religion of Constantinople, showcasing the city's wealth and power with grand churches and basilicas.

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For more than a millennium, Constantinople survived in the face of sieges, plagues, ethnic conflict, and religious schisms. But after it was sacked by Crusaders in 1204, the Ottoman Empire took advantage of the city's new vulnerability and conquered it for themselves. In the years to follow, Constantinople would become a predominantly Islamic city.

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The events of the early 20th century, including World War I, wiped out the already weakened Ottoman Empire, leading to the formation of several new countries. Among these was Turkey, who renamed Constantinople to the Turkish name Istanbul in 1930.

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