The Roman Empire

For the first two centuries of the Common Era, the Roman Empire was the most powerful state on the planet. Let's take a step back in time to learn more about this mighty imperial force—and what life was like for its millions of residents.

Before the rise of the empire, the Roman state was actually a republic—one where people elect politicians to represent their interests. But not everyone was a fan of this more democratic style of government. Throughout the Republic's 400-year history, military strongmen and politicians repeatedly attempted to seize control of the state. Chief among them was Julius Caesar, a general who hailed from a wealthy Roman family. After conquering the region we now know as France, he spent nearly a decade there as governor, taking over most of Western Europe in the process. In 45 BCE, when the Roman Senate moved to curtail his growing power, Caesar returned to Rome and declared a civil war. With critical financial support from the Egyptian kingdom, he managed to defeat all the other generals vying for control and was swiftly appointed dictator of the Republic.

Caesar's absolute reign didn't last long, and in 44 BCE, he was famously stabbed to death by a group of disgruntled senators. Rome was thrown into chaos as noblemen, politicians, and military leaders fought to succeed him. Finally after a long and bloody struggle, Caesar's adopted son Octavian was crowned emperor in 27 BCE. As emperor, Octavian, who came to be known as Augustus Caesar, had unlimited power: He could enact any law, raise an army to do his bidding, and create propaganda to bolster his image. Though the Senate and other vestiges of the Republic still existed, they no longer had any meaningful say in things. The age of the Roman Empire was officially underway.

Augustus's ascent also ushered in a period of peace known as the Pax Romana. Throughout this period, the empire's boundaries remained fairly stable, with territorial holdings extending as far west as the British isles and as far south as Egypt. Since people could move freely throughout the expansive empire, new ideas and technology spread quickly, and trade networks flourished. Without war or political conflict to worry about, Augustus and his successors were able to concentrate on public works projects, many of which were

designed to showcase Roman wealth and power. They created new departments for overseeing the empire's roads, aqueducts, and sewers, as well as a municipal fire-fighting brigade, postal service, and police force. Beautifying the capital city of Rome was also a priority. Augustus commissioned the construction of temples, government buildings, theaters, and bathhouses. The iconic Colosseum, an amphitheater that hosted gladiator contests and other public events, was completed during the reign of the Flavian emperors, who ruled from 69 to 80 CE.

But the Pax Romana couldn't last forever. Since the dawn of the empire, Roman emperors had ruled with few checks on their power. Earlier emperors, like Augustus, had preserved some elements of the Republic to keep up an appearance of democracy, but as time went on, these traditions were discarded entirely. On top of that, the Romans had never come up with a good system for choosing new emperors, so those vying for power often ended up assassinating or overthrowing each other. At one point, the empire went through more than two dozen rulers over the course of just 50 years. Other social problems, like food shortages, high unemployment, and out-of-control inflation, were exacerbated by the empire's unstable leadership, leading to widespread civil unrest.

Toward the end of the third century, it was becoming clear that the Roman Empire could no longer survive in its current form. So, the emperor Diocletian decided to divide it in two. The eastern half was home to Constantinople, which would become the capital of the powerful new Byzantine Empire. But the western half, where Rome was located, didn't fare quite as well. Unable to defend against invasions, the emperor Romulus Augustus surrendered to a Germanic tribe in 476. The Roman Empire had finally fallen.

Today, it's been more than 1,500 years since this mighty empire collapsed. Yet its impact remains visible worldwide—in our governments, our architecture, and so much more.