University of Reading

A brief history of ancient Rome

Additional resource

A timeline from 753 BC to 337 AD, looking at the successive kings, politicians, and emperors who ruled Rome's expanding empire.

DATE	EVENT	DESCRIPTION
21st April, 753 BC	Rome's mythological foundation	**Romulus and Remus** featured in legends of Rome's foundation; surviving accounts, differing in details, were left by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Livy, and Plutarch. Romulus and Remus were twin sons of the war god Mars, suckled and looked-after by a she-wolf after being thrown in the river Tiber by their great-uncle Amulius, the usurping king of Alba Longa, and drifting ashore. Raised after that by the shepherd Faustulus and his wife, the boys grew strong and were leaders of many daring adventures. Together they rose against Amulius, killed him, and founded their own city. They quarrelled over its site: Romulus killed Remus (who had preferred the Aventine) and founded his city, Rome, on the Palatine Hill.
753 – 509 BC	Reign of Kings	From the reign of Romulus there were six subsequent kings from the 8th until the mid-6th century BC. These kings are almost certainly legendary, but accounts of their reigns might contain broad historical truths. Roman monarchs were served by an advisory senate,

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		but held supreme judicial, military, executive, and priestly power. The last king, **Lucius Tarquinius Superbus**, was overthrown and a republican constitution installed in his place. Ever afterwards Romans were suspicious of kingly authority - a fact that the later emperors had to bear in mind.
509 BC	Formation of the Republic	**Tarquinius Superbus**, the last king was expelled in 509 BC. From then on two Consuls, the highest magistrates in the republican constitution, were elected each year from among the patricians (the aristocratic portion of the population). The poor suffered, especially in the early Republic, but in 367 BC the Sextian Laws allowed members of the plebeian class to become consuls - one of a series of reforms that enfranchised and protected the common people. Republican Rome saw the rise of nobility from both the patricians and the plebeians and the development of a clearly defined social hierarchy.
5th – 2nd centuries BC	Growth of the Roman empire	Rome expanded from a regional power to an Italian hegemon, defeating rivals up and down the Italian peninsula and then absorbing them as allies. There were defeats along the way - in 390BC Rome itself was sacked by invading Gallic tribes. By the third century BC Rome was largely in control of Italy, and now faced overseas threats and opportunities. A series of bitter Punic wars with Carthage (in modern Tunisia) ended with victory over Hannibal in 202BC and the eventual sack of Carthage in 146BC. In the same year Rome conquered Corinth, signalling her successful expansion into the Greek world.
133 – 88 BC	The Gracchi to the Social War	The growing republic was destabilised by the profits of conquest, the rise of a powerful aristocracy, and the resentment of the urban poor and Italian subjects who wanted their share. **Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus**

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		and **Gaius Sempronius Gracchus** were two brothers seeking social change in Rome. Both were elected as tribunes, a magistracy developed to protect the interest of the plebeians. **Tiberius**, elected in 133 BC, lobbied to redistribute surplus land to the poor. He encountered aristocratic opposition and was later murdered. His brother, **Gaius**, elected tribune in 123 and again in 122 BC, fought for similar reforms to taxation, the urban grain supply, and the promotion of citizenship for all Italian allies. He also met a violent death. The Gracchi brothers amongst others tackled growing problems of political and social imbalance within the Republic, but these problems remained unresolved. War broke out between the socii (Rome's Italian allies) and Rome in 91 BC, with the allies wanting to share the benefit of Roman land and citizenship rights; the war lasted until 88 BC and though Rome won, it also felt compelled to grant citizenship rights to Italian communities. In the long term, Rome's relative generosity with its citizenship – even ex-slaves could become citizens - was a source of flexibility and strength that set it apart from other ancient civilisations.
60 BC onwards	The end of the Republic	Conflict between leading politicians stretched the republican constitution throughout the first century BC, and ambitious politicians sought out new routes to power and influence. Various leading figures rose to prominence, paving the way for the eventual one-man rule of the Roman emperors.
60-53 BC; 43-33 BC	The first and second triumvirates	The so-called 'first triumvirate' was an informal alliance of three leading men, **Julius Caesar**, **Pompey the Great** and **Marcus Licinius Crassus**, who aimed to dominate the running of the Roman state in their own interests. It was formed in 60 BC and lasted until

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		Crassus' death (in battle) in 53BC. Caesar needed the support and finances of Crassus, who had made a fortune in property speculation, in order to stand for election as consul, and Pompey, a prestigious public figure but relative political outsider, needed a political base against his traditionalist opponents in the senate. In the end Caesar's power outstripped his rivals, and his friendship with Pompey eventually collapsed into bitter civil war. Twenty years later, the second triumvirate was formed in 43 BC in the aftermath of Caesar's assassination, consisting of his heir Octavian (later to be renamed Augustus), **Mark Anthony** and **Marcus Aemilius Lepidus**. This time the triumvirate was formally constituted, legally outranking all other magistrates. It enacted brutal confiscations against Caesar's enemies, and it too eventually collapsed into conflict between the triumvirs.
Lived: 100 BC – Ides of March 44 BC.	Julius Caesar	**Julius Caesar** was a great military leader and the supreme politician of the dying republic. He held, but transcended, many of the great offices of state including the consulship and the state's chief priesthood. After sharing power with triumviral colleagues he emerged as a sole ruler; in 49 BC he assumed the (official state) role of dictator, allowing him extraordinary powers which were usually invoked in desperate situations; this was renewed for an extraordinary term of 10 years in 46 BC, but in February 44 BC his dictatorship was extended for life. This was dangerously close to the kingship Rome had thrown off in 509 BC, and more than senatorial rivals and traditionalists could bear; Caesar was famously murdered on the Ides of March 44 BC, ushering in a civil war for his legacy. Caesar allegedly left ambitious plans for the redevelopment of Rome, ranging from magnificent theatre architecture and public libraries to engineering

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		schemes for canals and harbours. These supposed plans were used by his successor Augustus to justify his own ambitious redevelopment of Rome.
31 BC onwards	The Principate	After Caesar's death, Rome collapsed into renewed civil war between rival factions. For a while it was not clear whether the Roman empire would hold together, or what constitutional system would rule it. Julius Caesar had adopted his great nephew **Gaius Octavius** in his will; the young Octavian immediately moved to seize control of his 'father's' political and financial legacy, emerging as a sole ruler by 31BC and taking the title Augustus, 'the august one', in 27. His constitutional settlement of that year established him as Rome's first emperor. There was no new constitutional office of 'emperor', however: he ruled as 'princeps' or 'first among equals', holding a nominal combination of old republican offices and powers but ruling largely through personal authority.
31 BC – AD 68	The Julio-Claudian emperors	**The Julio-Claudian** dynasty, claiming authority through descent from Julius Caesar, became Rome's first imperial dynasty. The different styles of the five emperors from **Augustus** to **Nero** included different approaches to the city's architecture and infrastructure.
31 BC – AD 68	The Julio-Claudian Emperors	**Augustus 31BC - AD 14** Augustus had an immense impact on the changing nature of Roman political power, creating a new system of imperial rule while posing merely as the restorer of the battered republic. He enacted moral reforms, focusing on the importance of traditional family values. He was also a great patron of the arts, and largely rebuilt the damaged city of Rome. According to Suetonius (an ancient biographer), “he so beautified it that he could justly boast that he had found it built of brick and left it in marble.” His actions set the pattern for future emperors.

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		Tiberius AD 14-37 Son of Livia (Augustus' second wife), Tiberius was no-one's first choice (except his mother's) as heir. As rivals died throughout Augustus' long reign, he became the front runner and eventually ruled for over two decades. In power, Tiberius - a reserved man who grew up in Augustus' long shadow - earned a reputation as a morose, savage ruler. He did not leave a major architectural legacy in Rome. **Gaius ('Caligula') AD 37-41** The Emperor Gaius' affectionate childhood nickname 'Caligula' ('little boots') was bestowed on him by the soldiers he grew up with as he travelled with his father on campaign. Caligula inherited a legacy of goodwill when Tiberius died. He put on lavish games and spectacles, but swiftly gained a reputation for instability and cruelty. He was assassinated before he could accomplish much; his reported building plans included megalomaniac palace structures and ostentatious feats of engineering. **Claudius AD 41-54** Claudius was often left out of the limelight as he grew up, partly because of physical disabilities which embarrassed his family. He emerged as emperor after Caligula's assassination - no other plausible family member was left. Claudius, though remembered for his disastrous marriages, was a practical ruler. He expanded the imperial bureaucracy and reformed aspects of the Empire's administration. He built useful public works, including aqueducts (and the large 'aqueduct gate' at Porta Maggiore) and new harbour facilities at Portus that ensured the city's grain supply. **Nero AD 54-68** Popular among the poor, Nero was known for his extravagant games and ambitions as an actor and charioteer, much to the distaste of the upper classes. A large fire broke out in Rome in AD 64, destroying

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		many parts of the city. Nero used the opportunity of the ruins to build his Golden House, an extravagant palace complex situated on the slopes of the Palatine Hill. In the end his greed and cruelty caused revolts which ended his reign; resentment against his land-grabs and palace building was an important factor. He committed suicide with the words 'What an artist dies with me!'
AD 68 – 69	Year of the four Emperors	After the suicide of Nero in 68 AD, civil war broke out. Legions proclaimed their generals' emperor, hoping for enrichment. Rome was in disarray. **Galba**, **Otho**, **Vitellius** each lasted only a few months. The tough military commander Vespasian was proclaimed by his legions in Egypt and Judea, and acknowledged by the Senate towards the end of AD 69.
AD 69 – 96	The Flavian Emperors	**Vespasian (AD 69-79)** Vespasian, founder of the Flavian dynasty, had the hard task of appealing to a divided city and empire - Nero's old supporters among the common people, and his enemies in the senatorial aristocracy. He presented himself as a tough, grizzled, humble and hardworking alternative to Nero's flamboyance, the first in his family to reach elite rank. He enacted many reforms, expanded the Empire and increased taxes. The building of the Colosseum began on the site of Nero's Golden House; the regime portrayed this as giving the space back to the people of Rome. The Templum Pacis nearby continued a sequence of imperial forum spaces begun by Caesar and Augustus, to whose reigns Vespasian liked to look as models of imperial power and its expression in architecture. **Titus (AD 79-81)** Titus, Vespasian's elder son, died of illness after a short but popular reign. He famously destroyed the temple at Jerusalem in AD 70: the victory parade of its treasure into Rome is shown on his triumphal arch. The Colosseum was inaugurated by him in 80 AD after

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		ten years of construction, one of the architectural triumphs of the Flavian period. **Domitian (AD 81-96)** Domitian, the second son of Vespasian, came to power after his brother. Disliked by the senate, the increasingly paranoid Domitian executed many of their number. He did however build extensively in Rome and put on a great array of public spectacles, winning favour with the common people and the army, whose pay he increased. He started work on the Forum Transitorium and made substantial additions to the imperial palace complex on the Palatine Hill.
AD 96 – AD 180	The adoptive emperors	After the squalid court scandals of the Julio-Claudians, and the tyrannical reign of Domitian, Rome was suspicious of transmitting power along a bloodline. Partly by accident and partly by design, successive emperors now adopted adult heirs who had had a chance to prove their abilities and character. This helped establish a 'golden age' of prosperity and relative stability at Rome. The empire reached its greatest territorial extent, and many of the buildings we see on this course date from this period.
AD 96 – AD 98	Nerva	Declared emperor by the Senate after the assassination of Domitian, **Nerva** was a safe option who was already in his 60s. Rather disliked by the army, he lasted only two years. Nonetheless, his name is often attached to the Forum Transitorium in preference to that of his hated predecessor Domitian, who built it. Trajan was adopted by him and made his successor.
AD 98 – AD 117	Trajan	Adopted by Nerva, **Trajan** came to be regarded as 'the best of emperors'. He expanded the empire to its greatest extent, achieved a better working relationship with the senate than many of his predecessors, and had an eye on the welfare of the city of Rome and the provinces. He and his architect Apollodorus of

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		Damascus built many public works, including the Aqua Traiana aqueduct, a magnificent set of baths, the restoration of the Circus Maximus, and an enormous imperial forum complex (with libraries, a basilica, and the famous spiral column) funded by his conquest of Dacia (modern day Romania).
AD 117 – AD 138	Hadrian	Before becoming emperor, **Hadrian** was a successful military leader. He was adopted by the childless Trajan as successor, a relatively stable pattern that was followed for much of the second century. Hadrian spent much of his time outside of Rome, touring the provinces in person. Buildings across the empire - including Hadrian's Wall in northern Britain - attest to his restless activity. In Rome he built the Temple of Venus and Rome near the Colosseum, and a huge palace complex outside the city at Tivoli.
AD 138 – AD 192	The Antonines	**Antoninus Pius (AD 138-161)** Antoninus, adopted by Hadrian, was welcomed by the senate and was the last Emperor to reside permanently in Rome. A temple to the deified Antoninus and his wife Faustina is one of the more complete monuments in the Forum, preserved by conversion into a church. **Marcus Aurelius (AD 161-180)** Marcus Aurelius was a wise figure, a dabbler in Stoic philosophy and a much-liked Emperor; although lacking in military experience he was able to take command of the armies to good effect. He was not, however, a great building emperor. His monumental column at Rome is one of his few architectural legacies. Between AD 161 and 169 he shared power with his adoptive brother **Lucius Verus**. **Commodus (AD 180-192)** Commodus was Marcus Aurelius' son, the first father-to son succession of the second century. He was not a success: obsessed with arena sports and posing as the god Hercules, Commodus insulted and terrorised

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		the senate and neglected the welfare of the city and empire. He was eventually assassinated in AD 192.
AD 193 – AD 235	The Severan Emperors	**Septimius Severus (AD 193-211)** The death of Commodus led to civil war among rival claimants; Septimius Severus marched on Rome and after being accepted by the senate was able to defeat his rivals. To legitimise his power, he claimed himself as the adopted son of Marcus Aurelius. He looked for a model to the Flavian dynasty, the last to win power through civil war, and restored many of their buildings. The Septizodium is one of his additions to the cityscape in Rome. **Caracalla 198-217** Caracalla, Septimius' son was made co-emperor in 198. Septimius took his sons Caracalla and Geta on campaign with him to Britain, where he died and left them as joint emperors. Caracalla had Geta murdered and his image and name chiselled off every monument in the Roman empire. At Rome, Caracalla completed a magnificent bathhouse, now the best preserved of any in the city. **Macrinus (AD 217-218)** 217 Caracalla was murdered by his praetorian guard Macrinus, who only held his emperorship until 218. **Elagabalus (AD 218-222)** Born in Syria, Elagabalus was proclaimed son (and actual cousin) of Caracalla, and overthrew Macrinus at the bidding of his mother and grandmother. He assumed the name 'Elagabalus', after a RomanoSyrian sun-god. He was subsequently murdered by his family after a spectacularly debauched reign. **Severus Alexander (AD 222-235)** A cousin of Elagabalus, Severus Alexander under the strong influence of his mother set out to restore respectable imperial power. At Rome, he rebuilt Nero's bathhouse in the Campus Martius. With the empire

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		threatened on several fronts, Severus Alexander instigated an expedition to Persia, and later on to Upper Germany and Raetia. He met the same fate as so many before him, assassinated in a military uprising. His was the last stable reign for fifty years.
	The Third Century Crisis	A time of great strife for Rome and her Empire; there were 27 claimants to imperial power in 50 years, exposing the lack of a settled system for succession and the strain of governing such a huge area. There was constant change; armies installed and deposed rival candidates, and assassination was rife. Roman society had never been more divided; trade collapsed, poor harvests and plague caused misery, and hyperinflation and social breakdown ensued. Imperial building activity at Rome more or less stopped; emperors were absent, broke, and too busy staving off endless internal crises as well as external threats from Goths and Persians. Rome's primacy as an imperial capital gradually faded, paving the way for the rise of Constantinople and other centres like Milan and Trier.
AD 284 – AD 305	Tetrarchy and Diocletian	The emperor **Diocletian** brought the crisis to an end with a strong and innovative rule. In AD 293 he instituted a tetrarchy, a modern name for a form of government in which power was shared between four emperors (two senior Augusti and two junior Caesares), splitting the empire into east and west. Diocletian's extensive reorganisation of the empire also divided provinces into smaller units and redistributed the military on the frontier provinces. He reformed the currency and published an edict of maximum prices to try to stabilise the economy. In Rome he built the greatest of the huge imperial bathhouses. His reign enabled Rome to steady after 50 years of disarray. In 305 he abdicated and retired to his palace at Split, in modern Croatia -

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		no small achievement in itself after a half-century of assassination and usurpation.
AD 306 – AD 337	Constantine the Great	**Constantine** rose through the ranks of the tetrarchy and won a series of civil wars to make himself sole emperor. He continued Diocletian's civil, military, and economic reforms. By the end of his reign Constantine was a Christian, and his Edict of Milan (AD 313) legalised the once-outlawed religion and stopped the persecution of its followers - an action which later saw Constantine made a saint. His building works in Rome include an enormous brick and concrete Basilica whose three surviving vaults still dominate the Via Sacra, and a triumphal arch near the Colosseum. His real energy, however, was focused on his new eastern capital at Byzantium which he renamed after himself - Constantinople. His reign marks a major turning point in the history of Rome, and is the end point of this course.