



*Aegean Dawn – The Glory of Greece*  
2500–300 BC

*Before the dawn: the first Europeans*

It helps to be a god. As Zeus gazed along the Phoenician shore, his eye fell on a fair princess named Europa, playing on the beach. Seized with desire, he changed himself into a white bull and sauntered to her side. Entranced by the lovely creature, Europa put a garland around its neck and climbed on its back. According to the poet Ovid, the bull swam out to sea and reached the island of Crete. Here bull and princess somehow contrived to give birth to the future King Minos, stepfather of the monstrous Minotaur. From this improbable encounter was created a king, a country, a civilization and a continent.

We know little of the earliest occupants of the land to which Europa later gave her name. Prehistoric remains attest that they included both Neanderthals and Homo sapiens. Their culture embraced humans and animals, as depicted in France's Lascaux caves. Dating back some twenty millennia, these caves are still astonishing works, conveying the urge to depict reality in plastic form and hinting already at a shared humanity. At some point after the seventh millennium BC, Stone Age settlers either evolved from those crossing the Straits of Gibraltar or moved west from central Asia. They are commemorated in their henges, often gigantic structures such as England's Stonehenge, indicating a remarkable degree of social organization and engineering ability. Bone analysis shows

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visitors to Stonehenge travelling from as far as Switzerland. Early Europe was already bonded by travel.

Population movement greatly advanced with the discovery that tin and copper could be smelted to produce bronze. This made possible the making of utensils and the fashioning of weapons. Bronze meant trade, most easily by sea, and with it the growth of coastal settlements. Europe's interior was forested and largely impenetrable, but these settlements along rivers and coasts developed an outward-looking maritime culture, as travel by water was easier than by land.

From the fifth millennium, archaeologists have traced successive movements westwards out of Asia, the so-called Kurgan peoples from Anatolia, speaking proto-Indo-European and, from the third millennium, the incoming Celts. Trade was the lubricant of these movements. Artefacts were exchanged, from north to south and along the shores of the Baltic and North Seas and the Mediterranean. People travelled. People met. People learned.

With the late Bronze Age in the third millennium, Europe saw newcomers from two points of origin: east and south. From the east, people arrived from the Asian steppes and the Caucasus. Germanic peoples brought with them new Indo-European languages, mutating into Brythonic, Germanic, Slavonic, Greek, Italic and others. Their landlocked origins are suggested by having root words for family and farming, but none for sea and sailing. Indo-European offers a linguistic archaeology that, together with advances in the study of DNA, is constantly redefining this early period in Europe's story.

Other influences permeated the Mediterranean from further afield. By the second millennium BC, the world's most developed societies were emerging in the valleys of China's Yellow River, India's Indus and the 'fertile crescent' of the Euphrates and the Nile. Long before the stabilization of European settlement, these peoples mastered agriculture, construction, trade, art and, in Mesopotamia, writing. They developed cities and worshipped their ancestors as

gods. Their buildings could be colossal. The great pyramid at Giza (c.2560 BC) was, at 146 metres, the highest structure on Earth, until topped by Lincoln Cathedral in the fourteenth century.

Europa's supposed son, King Minos, was regarded as founder of the Minoan empire based on Crete. It appears to have lasted at least a thousand years, from c.2500 to c.1450. Though traditionally traced to settlers from Egypt or Mesopotamia, DNA archaeology finds Minoan skeletons more closely related to ancient Greeks. They were a people who traded across the eastern Mediterranean, built palaces, settled colonies and enjoyed athletics and bull-leaping. Their lives appear to have been pacific. Despite the practice of human sacrifice, we know of no warrior caste or cult of military violence. In the murals and ceramics of Minoan Knossos we glimpse the elegant youths of Knossos leading what seems a charmed life, the first delicate link in the chain of a distinctively European culture.

The Minoan empire is thought to have declined when the island's forests, crucial to bronze production, became exhausted. Its death blows appear to have been a series of natural catastrophes, chiefly the eruption of the island of Thera, radio-carbon dated to around 1630 BC. This great catastrophe produced a tsunami that swept across the eastern Mediterranean and all but eradicated the settlements on Crete. Influence now passed north to the Achaeans of Mycenae, forerunners of the mainland Greeks.

### *Aegean dawn and diaspora*

The Achaeans (or Mycenaean or Danaans) came to dominate the Aegean basin from c.1450 to c.1100. They were a land-based people under monarchical rulers, whose legends, heroes and Linear B script loomed over later Greek culture. They came into conflict with the Hittites, whose occupation of Asia Minor and the Levant had long

limited the northward expansion of Egypt. The Hittites were early exploiters of iron, working it into tough swords and thus more effective killing tools than clubs and stone axes. Coincidental with this period was the rise of the city of Troy, whose war with the Achaeans over the kidnap of their queen, Helen, culminated in its siege and conflagration, probably in the 1180s.

Succeeding centuries retold, and doubtless elaborated, this first recorded event in Europe's story, handed down and described by the poet Homer probably somewhere in the eighth century BC. It is a tale of tribes driven to extremes of violence and revenge by the behaviour of their neighbours. Their idols were not the static images of their ancestors. Their gods were hyperactive, anthropomorphic men and women, ready to display love, anger, jealousy and curiosity. Like humans, they schemed, argued and fought. And they backed their swords with what became Europe's most potent weapon, reason.

The so-called palace cultures of this early Greece came to an end sometime between 1200 and 1150 BC, whether through the exhaustion of woodland or natural disaster, such as volcanic eruption or plague. This period, roughly from 1100 to 900, is known as Greece's 'dark age'. It coincided with the overrunning of the Aegean basin by new intruders, Dorians in mainland Greece and Ionians on the Asia Minor coast – giving their names to styles of classical architecture. Since DNA indicates that even modern Greeks are descended from the earlier Mycenaeans, the newcomers may have conquered, but did not supplant.

As a result, the inland population dispersed from palace settlements into smaller coastal towns and villages. Here geography restricted expansion, and contact was largely by sea. This gave rise to the Greek polis, a small self-governing community that required all free citizens to participate in its defence. Such a state defined itself, said the Greek philosopher Aristotle, 'in being as far as possible composed of equals and peers', a designation that did not include women,

slaves or foreigners. The growth of these maritime micro-states stirred the rudiments of individualism, self-reliance and independence that were to define the Greek view of what constitutes a human community – and ultimately a human personality.

By c.800 BC these city states, with perhaps a total population of some 800,000, were outgrowing the narrow shores of the Aegean. They were spreading south across the Mediterranean and north towards the Black Sea. Here they came into contact, and potential conflict, with Phoenicians from Tyre and Sidon, settling as far west as Spain. The Phoenician city of Carthage, in what is now Tunisia, was reputedly founded in 814. For their part the Greeks settled north along the Mediterranean shore, in Sicily, Italy and even France. There was sufficient integration for the Greeks to adopt the Phoenician alphabet – retaining a version of it to this day.

As many as 1,000 Greek settlements from these times have been traced across the Mediterranean, far outnumbering in size, population and luxury their places of Aegean origin. Agrigentum in Sicily and Sybaris in southern Italy became large cities, the latter prosperous enough to yield the epithet 'sybaritic'. These colonists, who spoke Greek and carried Hellenic culture to the corners of the Mediterranean, would attend the annual Pan-Hellenic Olympic games, held in Greece from 776 onwards, like Americans returning across the Atlantic to visit their European homeland.

Nowhere evokes these times as well as the ancient city of Miletus, on the Turkish coast above present-day Bodrum. It was rebuilt in 479 after its destruction by the Persians. Its grid plan lies excavated but deserted, and modern visitors can walk down paved streets, enter houses, clamber over the theatre and climb the citadel, looking out over fields towards the sea. A warm breeze blows up from the Aegean, across hillsides of exquisite beauty.

These streets would have been awash in travellers' accounts of distant places, unusual practices, creative minds and violent conflicts.

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Such ideas were reflected in the lives of the gods and heroes, Aphrodite, Artemis, Hermes, Poseidon, Jason, Heracles and Theseus. Above all, the colonists were a curious people. A contemporary, Herodotus, is said to have remarked, 'Every year we send ships at great cost and danger as far as Africa, to ask "Who are you? What are your laws? What is your language?"' Why is it, he asked, 'they never send ships to ask us'? It was a question that holds within it a defining quality of later European civilization.

### *Persian Wars and the rise of Athens*

By the seventh century BC the cities of the Greek mainland had developed new ways of governing their polis. As if by trial and error, Corinth, Sparta, Athens and other cities found how they might live together in peace. Kingdoms gave way to aristocracies, oligarchies and tyrannies. Concepts such as freedom, justice and the fair distribution of resources were debated. In 621 Draco of Athens codified a set of harsh laws, including execution 'for idleness'. Draconian laws were written, it was said, in blood not ink. They were later modified by a magistrate, Solon, who dispersed power over a propertied class of citizens. His were the first steps towards the concept of civil rights.

In 508 there was a revolt in Athens against the prevailing aristocracy, led by an elder statesman, Cleisthenes. Rather than argue about which landed family should govern and when, he proposed that the entire male citizenry of Athens should rule the city. Citizens would be known not by their family name but by their *deme* or locality. Council membership and public offices should be chosen on a rota selected by lot. Only the magistracy was restricted to qualified candidates. Misbehaving officials could be exiled for ten years by a straight popular vote, a penalty termed ostracism.

Cleisthenes' form of democracy was suited to the intimacy of the polis, rather than being mediated (and moderated) by elected representatives. Some 50,000 free male citizens would have been involved in the lottery. It was the dawn of participatory government. The venue for meetings of the Athenian council can still be seen, on the Pnyx mound beneath the Acropolis, a strangely evocative jumble of rocks, ledges and alcoves. Curiously, the only memorial to Cleisthenes I know is in the Ohio statehouse.

In the sixth century BC, Greece's stability was threatened from the east. King Cyrus of Persia (559–530) reached the shores of the Aegean in 546 and went on to occupy all of Asia Minor, including the Greek Ionian islands. In 499 the Ionian Greeks revolted against Persia and were cruelly suppressed. King Darius (520–486) sent an army to punish the Athenians for supporting the Ionians. This was defeated at the Battle of Marathon in 490, with a reported 6,400 Persian dead against 192 Athenians. News reached the city by a runner, Pheidippides, who dropped dead after announcing the victory. His run is celebrated in marathons to this day. The Persians were eventually driven off in a sea battle at Salamis in 480 and a land battle at Plataea the following year.

The Greek victories, often against overwhelming odds, have been variously attributed to superior iron weapons and to the cult of male athleticism. The Greeks fought with the discipline of men defending their homes and families. Herodotus has their general, Themistocles, pleading in his speech before Salamis for loyalty not to the polis but to 'what is noble in man's nature and predicament'. Democracy was barely a quarter of a century old, but already its appeal was to citizens fighting as individuals, for a personal as well as collective freedom from tyranny.

The Persian Wars rank among the deciding events in Europe's evolution. Had the Persians triumphed, and Greece and the Aegean basin fallen under their sovereignty, so probably would the Balkans and



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much of the Mediterranean. Their peoples would have been drawn to the thrones, the gods and the customs of lands to the east. Since there was as yet no concept of Europe, there might never have been cause to invent one. Even so, the Persian Wars remind us that it was from Asia that Europe was initially colonized, and from whose story it has never quite been able to detach itself.

### *The Golden Age of Athens*

As the leading state of Greece in the Persian Wars, Athens claimed a military and cultural ascendancy that reached its peak in the Delian League (478–404). This soon became an Athenian empire, composed of some 300 tributary islands and settlements on the Aegean coastline. In 461 the city came under the leadership of a popular orator, Pericles (461–429), who secured the ostracism of his conservative opponent, Cimon. He presided over Athens throughout a third of a century of its so-called Golden Age. A cultured, ascetic, innovative man, he is said to have been susceptible only to his mistress, Aspasia. He sought peace with Persia in 449, but was constantly in conflict with the cities of the Delian League.

Pericles saw government as a web of interlocking civic and personal obligations, underpinned by an emerging rule of law. Periclean Athens blazed over the Aegean, a comet of intellectual and creative energy. The Acropolis was crowned with marble buildings. Its Parthenon temple to Athene was to become the most celebrated structure in the world, a template for (good) architects to this day. Round it were set temples to other gods, with beneath it the agora and theatre of Dionysus. These projects were financed from the Delian League, and as such were bitterly resented by its members.

To Pericles, civic life was fused with art. His friend, the sculptor Phidias, brought a new realism and grace to the previously stylized

portrayal of the human form. The playwrights Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus analysed the emotions of love, ambition and revenge. The satirist Aristophanes made the Greeks laugh at themselves. The historian Thucydides reminded Athenians of their greatest deeds, and greatest mistakes. Hippocrates analysed disease as a natural not divine phenomenon.

The city also found room for Socrates (469–399), prophet of the concept of deliberative reasoning. To Socrates humans were free agents with wills of their own, unbounded by Promethean myths of gods and creatures. To find wisdom they needed only to open their minds to the world around them, taking other people at face value, not as the gods or society formed them. Socrates championed reason against superstition, inquiry against authority. Above all, he said, humans owed it to their nature to be curious, to inquire without inhibition.

Socrates was the master of the dialectical method, of the sceptical and challenging question. His most brilliant pupil, Plato (429–347), went on to systematize Socrates' ideas into a structure of ethical and political behaviour, governing the relations of individuals to each other and to the polis. While Plato's statist ideology is nowadays contrasted with the sovereign nobility of the individual, it was a first recorded attempt to marry justice and freedom to a citizen's obligation to society. The Athens academy, set up by Plato in 387, was home to his pupil Aristotle (384–322). It was the cradle of the European mind, evoked during the Renaissance in Raphael's great Stanza fresco in the Vatican.

The reputation of Athens was to be revived and glamorized time and again in European history. Its 'invention' of democracy proved short lived. Its intellectual and cultural legacy owed its preservation to the scribes of Alexandria and the scholars of Rome. But the achievements of the Golden Age continue to tower over all other episodes in the European narrative. I first studied it at school and it

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has remained a source of wonder to me ever since how this small corner of an inland sea could have produced such astonishing innovation and understanding of the human condition. The concept of European civilization without Athens is impossible to conceive.

*The Peloponnesian Wars*

Thucydides recorded Pericles' last three speeches as masterpieces of Greek oratory. In them (or as Thucydides recalled them) the great leader declared that the root of Athens' genius lay in tolerance. Its laws 'afford equal justice to all in their private differences . . . If a man can serve the state, he is not hindered by the obscurity of his condition. The freedom we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life . . . We do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbour for doing what he likes.' The phrases of Pericles/Thucydides have echoed down the ages, to be quoted by generations of politicians and scholars and to underpin the values that later Europeans liked to think they brought to the world.

Perhaps like those later Europeans, Pericles viewed his values selectively. They were not applied to Athens' imperial conduct of the Delian League, let alone to women or slaves. Whether it is fair to ascribe the downfall of Athenian supremacy to other Greek concepts, such as hubris and nemesis, may be moot. Pericles claimed to have 'forced every sea and land to be the highway of our daring'. Eventually this highway rebelled. Subject cities of the Delian League allied themselves to Athens' rival Sparta, whose ascetic rulers had no truck with Periclean democracy or vanity. In 431 Pericles plunged his city into what became the Peloponnesian Wars with Sparta.

They were to prove his epitaph. By 429 the greatest Athenian was

dead of the plague. His war dragged on until 404, culminating in Sparta's victory and the suppression of the Delian League. The new monuments of Athens were almost razed to the ground by Spartan puritans, a fate reputedly averted only when the Athenians sang a chorus from Sophocles. While the momentum of the city's cultural life continued, the golden thread of democracy snapped, going the way its critics feared, into populism and mob rule. In 399 the Athenians decided they could not tolerate Socrates 'corrupting the minds of the young'. A corrupt jury forced him to commit suicide by drinking hemlock.

Aristotle surveyed a reputed 150 Greek constitutions, and concluded in favour of a 'structured Athenian polity', designed as a protection against raw populism. Comparing northern spirit with Asian intellect, he saw the Greeks as having both qualities. 'They have the best of political institutions,' he said. 'If they could achieve political unity they could control the rest of the world.' They could not achieve that unity. Athens allowed history to glimpse the practice of democracy, but not the means of sustaining it. That is the true art of politics, and it has eluded much of Europe, even to the present day.

### *The Age of Alexander*

Europe's history in these early centuries is best described as under a spotlight, roving this way and that along the shores of the Mediterranean as the continent's drama unfolds. Following the decline of Athens, Greece's cities saw constant strife, sometimes against, sometimes in alliance with, the ever-menacing Persians. In 359 the kingdom of Macedon came under an ambitious king, Philip, assertively Greek and claiming descent from the Homeric Achilles. His army of pikemen, able to engage an enemy at more than arm's

length, swiftly subjugated the city states of Greece. In 336 Philip was assassinated by hands unknown, and was succeeded by his twenty-year-old son, Alexander.

The youth was clearly extraordinary. He had been taught military leadership by his father, who hired Aristotle among others to tutor him in philosophy and politics. Small but charismatic, he reputedly had one blue eye and one brown, and a mesmeric hold on those he commanded. Undaunted by his youth, perhaps emboldened by it, Alexander set out to fulfil Philip's ambition to advance his empire beyond Greece into the lands held by Persia.

It was to be the most remarkable venture in the history of European conquest. Crossing Asia Minor, Alexander in 333 defeated a much larger Persian force under Darius III at the Battle of Issus. He took Darius's daughters captive and was later to marry two of them, though in the meantime he was entranced by a Bactrian princess, Roxana. Rather than simply return home with honour satisfied, Alexander now marched south to Egypt. Here his general, Ptolemy, went on to found a dynasty that was to end with Cleopatra. Ptolemy built the library at Alexandria, inventing papyrus scrolls and banning their export to the rival library of Pergamum, where costly animal parchment was still in use.

Alexander again defeated Darius and marched through Mesopotamia and across a defenceless Persia to the banks of the Indus in India. Here his generals mutinied and demanded they return home. Alexander thus had to travel back across the sands of Persia to Babylon, where in 323 he died of disease, aged just thirty-two. Everywhere he went, Alexander founded cities and colonies, many named after himself. He had crushed the greatest empire in south-west Asia. He married his troops to local women and left his commanders as local governors. But the influence of these Hellenistic colonies on the lands traversed by Alexander was not political. He left no empire.

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Like most such ventures, Alexander's journey was ultimately fruitless, the expression of a gigantic vanity and greed for booty. His imperial creation was vacuous and never established a secure frontier for the Greeks in Asia Minor or Mesopotamia. It was to prove Europe's most porous boundary throughout history. But the short-lived Macedonian empire did have one lasting outcome. It entrenched Hellenistic civilization, that of Greek language and literature, across the Mediterranean. As mainland Greece fell victim to civil war, Greek traders and scholars spread out across the sea, a diaspora that historians estimate eventually numbered ten million people. The library at Alexandria became the repository and disseminator of Greece's cultural heritage.

Greece's political glory died with Alexander. But his reputation lived on, appealing to the vanity of later rulers. With his death, the window on the human spirit opened by classical Athens was to close. Our searchlight now swings west, to illuminate a city whose genius lay not in the excitement of Periclean democracy but in the potency of a militaristic republic.

## *The Ascendancy of Rome* 500 BC—AD 300

### *The birth of the republic*

If Greece was founded by a princess raped by a bull, Rome was founded by a baby suckled by a she-wolf. Somewhere in the mist of time, Romulus killed his twin Remus in an argument over where to locate the city of Rome, leaving Romulus free to choose. Many years later, at the turn of the fifth century BC, as the Athenians were ousting aristocracy in favour of democracy, the Romans ousted monarchy in favour of a republic. In 509 they exiled Tarquin the Proud, who then asked Lars Porsena of adjacent Tuscany to assist his restoration. The conflict ended in a legendary confrontation, graphically described by Macaulay in his *Lays of Ancient Rome*. Horatius' heroic defence of a bridge over the Tiber put the Tuscans to flight and came to embody military heroism. A statue of the kindly wolf is in Rome's Capitoline Museums. Once 'Etruscan', it is eleventh century.

The Romans were ancient inhabitants of Latium, the area now comprising central western Italy. Their republic was similar to Athens in that it sought to legitimize government accountability. A senate of hereditary patricians wielded executive power through two consuls, elected by free Roman citizens. Separate from it was a council of plebeians, led by tribunes who passed the council's views to the senate, not least on matters of taxation. Consuls and tribunes thus established a creative tension at the heart of the republic. As in Greece, state security required every citizen, when summoned, to

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serve in the army. This comprised legions of infantry, divided into units of a hundred men under centurions. They fought in disciplined phalanxes with linked shields and long spears, flanked by chariots. They were almost invincible in open battle.

## *The First Punic War*

For two centuries republican Rome remained a city state. It did not seek to expand beyond its region, let alone imitate Athens or Macedonia and embark on empire building. Only with the start of the third century did it expand across the south of Italy, where it came into conflict with Greek and Phoenician settlements along the Mediterranean coast. In 264 the Romans crossed into Sicily and challenged Carthage for control of the western sea. The Roman infantry captured Messina, but Carthage's navy remained dominant. In 241 the Romans arrived in a fleet of a hundred quinqueremes (rowing galleys) and drove the Carthaginians from the island. Thus ended the first of three Punic (or Phoenician) Wars, a fierce enmity between the two western Mediterranean powers.

In 218 a twenty-nine-year-old Carthaginian general, Hannibal, decided to attack Rome overland from Spain. He led an army through the Alps with thirty-seven battle elephants, only one of which reached Italy. The route remains a subject of scholarly debate and documentary film-making. In Italy Hannibal was able to rely, with good reason, on Rome's now subjected Italian provinces to rise up in his support. He defeated the Romans at the epic battles at Lake Trasimene in 217 and Cannae in 216, the latter being regarded as the most searing defeat in Rome's history so far, with more than 40,000 soldiers slaughtered.

Hannibal was unable to push his advantage to a conclusion. He remained penned down in the Italian countryside by the guerrilla



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tactics of a new Roman general, Fabius Cunctator, the 'Delayer', and never reached Rome. Another Roman general, Scipio, eventually drove the Carthaginians from Italy and finally, in 202, attacked Carthage itself. The city remained to Rome what Persia had been to Athens, an ever-present threat, yielding a jingoist slogan: *Carthago delenda est*, Carthage must be destroyed. It was, eventually, in 146.

### *The birth of empire*

By the second century Rome's supremacy over the western Mediterranean was almost complete, and the expansion of its rule quickened. In addition to Italy, provinces were carved out of southern Spain, southern Gaul and northern Africa. To the east, a Roman force in 200 aided Athens in freeing itself from the weakening yoke of Macedon, and by 133 a new Asiatic Roman province had been created from Alexander's Pergamum. Each of these provinces had to submit to the sovereignty and taxes of Rome, receiving in return Rome's protection and citizenship for its leaders.

This Graeco-Roman ideal of citizenship under the rule of law became the glue of Rome's emergent statehood. Even as they conquered, Romans absorbed the prevailing Hellenism of the Mediterranean basin. They collected the Greeks' literature, copied their architecture and imported their sculpture. They revered the great library at Alexandria. Upper-class Romans spoke Greek and taught it to their children, much as European aristocrats were later to speak French and then English. Rome adopted Athenian philosophical fashions, such as those of the Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics and Cynics. The orator Cicero was inspired by Greek law and the rhetoric of his Greek forebear, Demosthenes.

This was not to every taste. The self-styled patriot Cato (234–149) regarded the magnetism of Greek culture to the Romans as a 'soft'

affectation. It eroded the virility of youth with the habits of a 'most wretched and unruly race'. The poet Horace wrote that 'captive Greece has made a captive of her rude conqueror'. Years later, the poet Virgil achieved a synthesis of the two cultures. He told his compatriots that the Greeks might 'draw forth living features from marble'; they might be better lawyers, astronomers and mathematicians. But these virtues depended on the freedom to act. 'You, O Romans, govern the nations with your power. Remember this. These be your arts – to impose the ways of peace.' Peace, said Virgil, began with military supremacy, so beginning a Roman stress on the virtues of warfare that lasted to the end of the empire.

Virgil's Pax Romana was based on a standing army some 125,000 strong, excluding auxiliaries. Its legions, led by patrician generals who ruled provinces with the power of warlords, were dispersed throughout the empire. While appointed by the senate, these generals grew rich on booty and taxes. This won them the often exclusive loyalty of their soldiers, but also enabled them to buy political power back in Rome. Provincial politics thus came to dominate the politics of the republic.

Matters came to a head in 133 under the tribunes Tiberius Gracchus and, later, his brother, Gaius, who sought to redistribute land to war veterans and plebeians. The Gracchi were opposed by wealthy senators, who arranged their assassination. But other politicians and former generals, such as Cinna and Sulla, took their place, testing the institutions of the republic to destruction. In 82, Sulla declared himself dictator of Rome, having introduced reforms that turned a bribed and corrupted senate into an oligarchy. A sign of the new insecurity came in 73, when gladiators near Capua staged a rebellion under their charismatic leader, Spartacus. He attracted an army of 70,000 slaves and supporters, swollen within a year to 120,000. The resulting civil war culminated in the slaves' defeat. Six thousand ghoulish crucifixions lined the roads into Rome as a deterrent to repetition.

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The Roman republic was now suffering the same strains as had Athenian democracy. Personal power and ambition were corrupting its institutions and circumventing its defences. A victor in Rome's many civil wars, a soldier named Pompey, was made sole consul in 52. He had gained fame and fortune through his military successes, rewarded with three triumphal parades, in one of which he rode in a jewelled chariot, attended by wild animals and carrying a globe representing his conquests. The supposed balance of power between the senate, consuls and tribunes eventually collapsed when one man could control each in turn through public acclaim. There is no force so potent as populism.

### *Julius Caesar*

Rome's *Senatus Populusque Romanus* (SPQR) had become dictatorship. Pompey was soon challenged by another returning general, Julius Caesar, member of an old Roman family. Like Pompey, he had become consul and army commander of the two provinces of Gaul, south and north of the Alps. He was thus ruler of large territories and open to consequent self-enrichment. Caesar was a brilliant soldier, ruthless, calm-headed and a literate historian of his own triumphs. His Gallic Wars (58–50) took Rome's frontier north to the English Channel and east to the Rhine. A third of Gaul's adult males were estimated (by Caesar) to have died in the process, and another third sold into slavery, much to Caesar's profit. Gaul west of the Rhine was subjected to Rome, and its leader, Vercingetorix, was sent there to be paraded in the streets and then killed.

Pompey was effectively ruler of the republic, but in 50 the senate voted that both he and Caesar disband their armies. Caesar disregarded this and in 49 he headed south from Gaul, breaking the law requiring generals to relinquish their legions on leaving command

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of their provinces. He theatrically ‘crossed the Rubicon’, the river dividing south Gaul from Rome, and entered Italy. Here he confronted the jealous Pompey, and found (and bought) support among the citizens of Rome. Pompey fled to Greece with his legions.

For two years Rome was engulfed in civil conflict. Caesar was declared dictator, testing the loyalty of such conservative republicans as Cicero, whose letters recording these times form a gripping account of first-century Rome. By 48 Caesar had chased Pompey from Greece south to Egypt and eventual assassination. On his subsequent arrival, Caesar met the twenty-one-year-old Cleopatra, co-ruler of Egypt with her brothers. She was carried into his presence wrapped in a carpet. He was smitten and she bore him a son.

Caesar now had to fight campaigns in Greece, Italy, Spain and Africa, often against mutinous armies. In early 44 he was back in Rome, showered with triumphs and honours, including that of ‘perpetual’ dictatorship. Money looted from the provinces was distributed to soldiers and Roman citizens. One soldier who dared protest Caesar’s extravagance was killed, and his corpse nailed to the wall of the forum. All must suffer who oppose public sector vanity projects.

Rome was at Caesar’s feet, but on the Ides of March 44 came nemesis. Within minutes of Caesar’s arriving in the curia, he fell under a flurry of knife wounds from senatorial conspirators, including his old colleague Brutus. Reports conflict as to what were his last words, except that no one records Shakespeare’s ‘Et tu, Brute?’ Suetonius records him saying nothing – and anyway it would have been in Greek.

## *The rise of Octavian Augustus*

The outcome was Rome leaderless and in chaos. Finding the citizens shocked at both the fact and the manner of Caesar’s death, the conspirators fled the city. Caesar’s will left his putative empire to

his eighteen-year-old nephew and adopted son, Octavian. A consul, Mark Antony, rashly denied the will and refused to pay Caesar's soldiers. The young Octavian summoned them to his standard, while the elderly Cicero wrote a series of lengthy speeches in his defence. Entitled the *Philippics*, they recklessly savaged Antony for everything from lust to violence, treason and greed.

Octavian, though still a teenager, acted with diplomacy. He strengthened his power base in Rome by making overtures to Antony. This reconciliation sealed the fate of Cicero, who in 43 fled Rome but was hunted down and killed, his hand and tongue pinned up in the Senate by his enemies. His epigrams remain gems of Roman letters: 'He only employs his passion, who can make no use of his reason . . . Politicians are not born, they are excreted . . . With a garden and a library, a man has everything he could need.'

Caesar's assassins were pursued to Greece by Octavian and Antony together, and killed after the Battle of Philippi in 42. Relations between the two leaders soon deteriorated. Antony had taken as his command the eastern empire, where he fought a series of successful campaigns to secure the frontier against Parthian (formerly Persian) aggression. He appointed Herod as king of Judaea and, in 41, followed Caesar's steps to Egypt. When he summoned Cleopatra to meet him at Tarsus in southern Turkey, she arrived not in a carpet but on her boat under a golden canopy, lying on a bed of roses. This time the result was twins, a boy and a girl, and Antony understandably reluctant to return to Rome.

When in 40 Antony did return, he sought peace by marrying Octavian's sister, but soon returned to Egypt, to Cleopatra and the production of another son. He named his earlier twins after the sun and moon and declared Cleopatra's now thirteen-year-old son by Caesar, Caesarion, king of kings. When reported back to Rome, this was understandably regarded as a fatal provocation. Octavian had by now restored his supremacy and taken the title of Caesar, with its implied divinity.

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In 31, Octavian declared war on Cleopatra (as proxy for Antony), and crossed the Mediterranean to confront them. At the Battle of Actium in Greece, Antony and Cleopatra were beaten and escaped back to Alexandria. When Octavian came to capture them, Antony committed suicide, dying reputedly in Cleopatra's arms. She too died days later, probably by poisoning. Her reported death by an Egyptian cobra is thought to be a myth. With the later assistance of Shakespeare, Rome had given the world its most theatrical assassination, its most exotic love affair and its most romantic suicide.

### *Augustus, imperator*

If any man deserves the title of founder of modern Europe, it is Octavian (Caesar Augustus). A handsome man of medium stature, intelligent, slow to anger, he was ruthless when necessary, otherwise merciful. He displayed little of the egotistical ostentation of his earlier rivals, and preserved the forms of the old republic, calling himself 'first citizen', servant of the senate and one of two consuls. None the less, in 27 he took the imperial title of Augustus, with absolute power over the senate, the administration, the courts and the army. His soldiers were well rewarded and Rome's citizens were kept content on the tribute of empire. He was in truth a tyrant.

Augustus did not create the Roman empire, which he inherited from an assemblage of territories acquired under two centuries of republicanism. He was rather its shrewd consolidator. He tidied the imperial boundaries by completing the conquest of Spain, Egypt and Syria. His one significant defeat, in AD 9, was of his general Varus at the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest in Saxony. Three entire legions were wiped out by Arminius, a Rome-trained leader of the Germanic tribes east of the Rhine. Augustus was devastated and

refused to shave for months afterwards. The defeat remained on his conscience to the end.

Arminius's victory has been ranked among the decisive battles in Europe's evolution. It placed the east side of the Rhine beyond the boundary of the Roman empire, a territory now distinct from Gaul. Germans became a source of legionary recruitment, but they never came within the orbit of Roman rule or culture. The divide thus established proved to be a territorial, national and eventually psychological barrier across Europe. Arminius, Germanized as Hermann, had the misfortune to become a hero of Nazism and is consequently little celebrated today even in his own land.

Augustus was careful in his choice of aides. He relied militarily on his minister of war, Agrippa, and domestically on the able Maecenas. The latter set a rare precedent in being minister of both the interior and the arts. Under his patronage, what came to be called the Augustan age flourished. Virgil and Livy celebrated the history of the Roman state. Horace was court lyricist. Ovid, an erotic poet, evolved in his *Metamorphoses* into a writer of philosophical depth. Either his radicalism or his lascivious verse had him exiled to the Black Sea, where he became a poet of the expatriate experience: 'Our native soil draws all of us, by I know not what sweetness, and never allows us to forget.'

The culture of Hellenism remained undimmed. As the supply of Greek statuary began to run dry, patricians had it copied so well it is hard for experts to tell Greek from Roman work. Vitruvius revised the principles of Greek architecture, as cities across the empire blossomed with markets, temples and forums. Augustus claimed to have found Rome 'a city of clay and left it one of marble'. Augustan classicism became the defining style of imperial power.

With security came Rome's greatest gift to early Europe, economic prosperity. Cargo ships traversed the Mediterranean, bringing the produce of distant lands to the tables of the capital. Aqueducts supplied its baths, on a scale not to be matched until the nineteenth

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century. Stadia and circuses offered public entertainment, albeit with cruelty and violence. Roads were plentiful. Twenty-nine highways radiated from Rome, to become the arteries of empire, enabling legions to move to trouble spots with speed. Rome's chariot mail service could carry letters fifty miles a day. One service Rome failed to master was that of street cleaning. Streets were sewers and the source of constant complaints.

Augustus's reign lasted over forty years until his death in AD 14. The empire he founded lasted five centuries – and its Byzantine offshoot for fourteen. Despite the fondness of its rulers for the rhetoric of immortality, its greatest weakness was that it had to rely for its continuity on a mortal being. The emperor was the fount of patronage and the arbiter of life and death for millions. There was no formal succession, and no check on imperial discretion beyond assassination. Of the first twenty-three holders of the office, most died a violent death, which was often followed by a period of anarchy. They inspired Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, one of history's most beguiling classics.

### *Tiberius and the birth of Christianity*

Augustus's stepson, Tiberius (14–37), had been a fine general, notably on the Danube frontier. But he was a gloomy and malign emperor with reputedly bizarre sexual tastes, mostly involving children. He soon abandoned Rome for his palace on Capri, where rumour spread of his vices. It was towards the end of his reign that a local governor in Judaea named Pontius Pilate executed by crucifixion an obscure Jewish teacher, Jesus of Nazareth. His crime was allegedly claiming to be the king of the Jews. His death passed unrecorded at the time.

The first of Jesus's followers to be noted was a Jewish tent-maker turned persecutor of early Christians, Saul of Tarsus. Following his



conversion on the road to Damascus, Saul (later Paul) returned to Jerusalem and was in contact with the apostles Peter and James before beginning an extensive ministry across the eastern Mediterranean. The Jews were an exclusive group who did not proselytize and, as a result, were tolerated. As a Jewish sect, Christians might have stayed in Judaea. Instead they spread their faith across the eastern empire, as testified by Paul's letters. He later wrote to the Corinthians, 'If I know not the power of the voice, I shall be as a barbarian to him with whom I speak; and he that speaks, as a barbarian to me.' That voice was Greek, the language of the eastern empire and of early Christianity. In the mouths of Christian missionaries, it was to prove phenomenally appealing.

Following the death of Tiberius, emperors followed thick and fast. His immediate successor, Caligula (37–41), was noted for obscene pastimes similar to those of his predecessor. He declared himself a god and insulted the senate by proposing to make his favourite horse a consul. Murdered by his own bodyguards, he was followed by Claudius (41–54), under whom much of England was conquered, and then by Nero (54–68), who reverted to depravity, much to the subsequent delight of Hollywood. It was a sign of the growth of Christianity that Nero found it advantageous to choose Christians as scapegoats for the burning of Rome in 64, feeding them to wild beasts in the Colosseum.

Sometime after 57, Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, falsely accused of taking a non-Jew into the temple. After spending two years in prison, Paul claimed his right as a Roman citizen to trial in Rome, where he arrived in about 60 and remained, presumably awaiting trial, for some four years. The religious historian Diarmaid MacCulloch points to the importance of Paul's status as a citizen of the empire, indicating that 'the Jewish prophet, who had seized his allegiance in a vision had a message for all people, and not just the Jews'. Paul's appeal to Rome was another crucial factor in disseminating Christianity across the empire.

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Paul was executed in 64 or later, possibly in the Neronian persecution. The apostle Peter also appears to have been in Rome and killed at the same time, though there is little evidence for this, and none for his founding a church or serving as its leader. Scholars regard almost everything attributed to Peter in Rome as oral tradition, and possible textual insertion. Yet the names of these two men, Paul a Greek-speaking businessman, and Peter an Aramaic-speaking fisherman, were to dominate Roman and Orthodox Christendom. In 70 the emperor Vespasian (69–79) suppressed a Jewish rebellion, culminating in the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. The resulting exodus of Christians from the city at this time marked the emphatic separation of early Christianity from its Judaic roots.

## *The Antonines: empire at its zenith*

Vespasian initiated the Flavian line which, followed by the Antonines, brought Rome relative stability in the second century AD. Its most notable achievements were under Trajan (98–117), when the empire reached its greatest extent, stretching from Britain in the north to Dacia and Armenia in the east. It briefly touched the shores of the Caspian Sea and embraced Syria, Mesopotamia and Mauritania. The Mediterranean was now a Roman lake, and the empire was more Asian than European. Over all this, Roman order, Roman justice and, to a degree, Roman prosperity ruled, to be admiringly charted by the historian Pliny.

Trajan was succeeded by a master-builder, Hadrian (117–38). His greatest constructs, the Pantheon in Rome (126) and Hadrian's Wall (122) in Britain, still stand, the wall a massive testament to early empire. Of all the emperors, Hadrian had the clearest concept of the extent of Roman power, and perhaps its limitations. He withdrew from some of Trajan's gains, explaining that their peoples 'must

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have their freedom, if we cannot give them protection'. Hadrian was one of the few emperors who stand out from Roman history as worthy of the title. His interests united the cultures of Greece and Rome. He concerned himself with the law as well as philosophy, architecture and poetry. He travelled his empire as ruler, not just conqueror. An Epicurean, he had no fear of death.

There followed the philosopher emperor Marcus Aurelius (161–80), author of a book of Stoic meditations that remains popular to this day. Like Hadrian he continued to persecute Christians, being ready to tolerate freedom of belief, but not defiance of Rome's emperors-as-gods. To supplant the emperor in this way was tantamount to treason. Romans could not see why Christians could not even nod in this direction. It was their 'obstinacy and unbending perversity' that so infuriated Pliny as governor of the Greek province of Bithynia.

These were to be regarded in retrospect as golden years. Rome under the Antonines seemed at ease with itself. It had clear boundaries, unprecedented security, freedom of travel, a common administrative language and a legal framework. Gibbon concluded that, if he had to choose a period in history 'during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous', he would choose from the death of Domitian in 96 to that of Marcus Aurelius in 180. When the latter died, said a later Roman, 'our history now descends from a kingdom of gold to one of iron and rust'.

### *The crisis of the third century*

By the third century, Rome's empire had grown unmanageably big. Its population was estimated at sixty million, with a million in Rome itself, a city of a size Europe would not see again until the nineteenth century (excepting possibly Constantinople). But its government lacked the executive sinews and the discipline of the

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old republic. Above all, it lacked the continuity of a legitimate succession. The practice of emperors anointing their successors by adopting them as sons ensured neither competence nor consent. Almost every succession was challenged. Rome's central government lost coherence and sense of purpose. Its ethos became one of survival.

Under the last Antonine, Commodus (180–92), Rome reverted to the narcissism and self-indulgence of Nero. By now, frontier commanders were behaving as licensed warlords, while anarchy prevailed in Rome. Commodus was eventually murdered in 192 by his mistress, Marcia, a member of the empire's burgeoning Christian community. His replacement, Septimius Severus (193–211), the first emperor to have been born in Africa, extended Rome's frontier in the east. He rebuilt the magnificent Leptis Magna in Libya, his birthplace, as well as Baalbek in what was Roman Syria.

The army remained some 400,000 strong but this meant heavy taxes, diluted loyalties and indiscipline. While the army might be strong on the frontier, it tended to weakness behind the lines. In 212, the tyrannical Caracalla (198–217) sought to curry favour – and increase revenues – by awarding Roman citizenship to all free residents of the empire. To the historian Mary Beard, this was the end of Rome as strictly an empire, by 'eroding the difference between conqueror and conquered'. Rome's domain was acquiring a hard crust but a soft centre.

During what is dubbed the 'crisis of the third century', conditions deteriorated. Emperors now tended to wear armour and be depicted as soldiers, the latter a custom retained by monarchs (including the British) to this day. In Rome, disease and famine became commonplace. Emperors were venal and idle, or at least eccentric. The literary Gordian II, who ruled for a month in 238, boasted twenty-two concubines and 62,000 books. In 268 an army of Gothic insurgents raided as far south as Athens.

As the city of Rome began a long period of decline, it attracted a

close-knit network of Christian communities, pilgrims to its shrines to Peter and Paul. It remains unclear whether this alone was the cause of Rome's rise to ecclesiastical supremacy. This status was by no means preordained, as Christianity was a sect of the eastern Mediterranean, with centres in Antioch and Alexandria. The Bishop of Rome emerged only gradually as the church's father, or *papa*, while the city struggled with its eastern rivals both over primacy and over the nature of Christ's divinity. Its emergent factionalism, and later schism, was indicated as early as Paul, who in his first letter to the Corinthians pleaded, 'I beseech you, brethren . . . that you all speak the same thing and that there be no divisions among you.'

At the turn of the fourth century the emperor Diocletian (284–305) began a new phase in the empire's history. He restored to the imperial throne the competence and stability of the Antonines. He reformed the currency and the bureaucracy, and campaigned ceaselessly to secure the empire's frontiers, variously defeating Germans, Slavs, Egyptians and Persians. A religious conservative, he in 303 initiated the last systematic persecution of Christians, though the faith was sufficiently entrenched for this to be short lived.

Above all, Diocletian confronted the central weakness of all empires, its unmanageable size. In the case of Rome, he saw that a capital city long accustomed to live on the subsidies of empire was being debilitated by them. He duly divided the empire in two, east and west. He took the eastern half, based in Antioch, and appointed his commander, Maximian, to take the west. The western capital he moved from Rome north to Milan, to be closer to the legions on the frontier.

Then in 305 Diocletian did what no emperor had done before. He abdicated and retired to Split in his Dalmatian homeland. In 312 he was a rare emperor to die in his bed. His palace stands to this day, excavated in the eighteenth century, and inspiring the Georgian architecture of Robert Adam. But an empire which he had divided to keep together, now found itself divided and increasingly apart.

## *Goths, Huns and Christians*

### *300–560*

#### *Constantine and Byzantium*

From the moment of Diocletian's division of the empire, Europe moved into a state of transition. It was leaving the domain of a mostly united Mediterranean littoral centred on Rome, and approaching one whose loyalties were split between its western and eastern possessions. This gulf was long to outlast the Roman empire. There were other divisions. One was between a pagan autocracy and the authority of a new faith, Christianity. Another was between a dominant Graeco-Roman culture and the experience of peoples the Romans called 'barbarians' – not necessarily a derogatory term – living on and beyond Rome's borders.

It was symbolic of this new Europe that, when the western emperor Constantius died in 306 and was succeeded by his son, Constantine (306–37), both events occurred in York, at the empire's northern extremity. When Constantine's soldiers saluted him as the new emperor, it was not the end of the matter. He had to spend the next eighteen years fighting rivals to claim his title. Not until 324 did he win supremacy over both eastern and western thrones. He had been trained at Diocletian's eastern court and that was where Constantine's heart lay. He duly announced that he would found a new city at Byzantium, overlooking the Bosphorus. Constantinople would be the superior capital, the new Rome.

By now Constantine was a seasoned soldier and autocrat, ruthless,