

# THE EMPERORS OF ROME

## THE WEST

## THE EAST

JULIO-CLAUDIANS

FLAVIANS

ANTONINES

SEVERANS

CRISIS

TETRACHY AND HOUSE OF CONSTANTINE

HOUSE OF VALENTINIAN & THEODOSIUS

FALL OF THE WEST

BYZANTINE EMPIRE

1 AD

100

200

300

400

500

**Julio-Claudians**  
The civil wars following the death of Julius Caesar were won by his grand-nephew Gaius Octavius Thurinus. Through a series of brilliant political manoeuvres, he guided the demands of the old republican families (nobles), the legions, and the people into the constitutional settlements of 27 BC and 23 BC. He merged all the major republican offices – civil, military, religious, and judicial – into one unique power; symbolised by his titles of Augustus ("illustrious"), Princeps ("first citizen"), and Imperator ("victorious general"); and established a hereditary principle of succession; essentially recreating the ancient Roman monarchy. The robust system he established, the Principate, survived for over 200 years. The Julio-Claudians are his descendants (Julians), or those of his wife Livia Drusilla (Claudians).  
The empire adopted a system of forward defence, where incursions were neutralised before they reached the borders, and client states acted as buffer areas.

Routine use of judicial execution. Treason redefined as any threat to the imperial family.



Augustus



Tiberius



Caligula



Claudius



Nero



Vespasian



Domitian



Trajan



Hadrian



Antoninus Pius



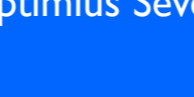
Lucius Verus



Marcus Aurelius



Commodus



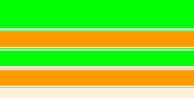
Septimius Severus



Caracalla



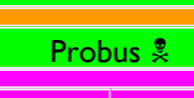
Severus Alexander



Gordian III



Philip the Arab



Trebonianus Gallus



Quintillus



Tacitus



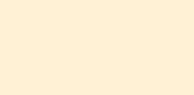
Carus



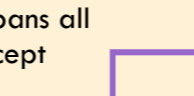
Maximian



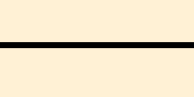
Diocletian



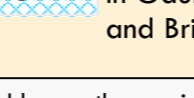
Galerius



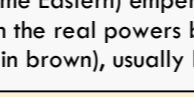
Licinius



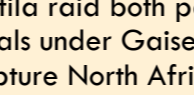
Constantine I the Great



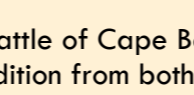
Constantine II



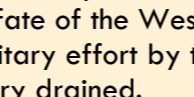
Constans



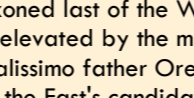
Julian the Apostate



Valens



Theodosius I the Great



Arcadius



Theodosius II



Marcian



Leo I the Great



Leo II



Basiliscus



Zeno the Isaurian



Anastasius I

First emperor raised to power by the army.  
Year of the Four Emperors  
First Roman civil war since the defeat of Marcus Antonius in 30 BC.

**Severans**  
Lucius Septimius Severus won the four-year civil war following the death of Marcus Aurelius' deranged son Commodus. His ineffective family's reign marks the increasing militarisation of the empire at the expense of the civil populace, and the slow decline of the old Roman legion.  
**Crisis**  
Collapse of central and senatorial authority. Emperors are made at the whim of the legionary armies (Rhine, Danube, Orient). Mass incursions of barbarians. The nadir of Roman fortunes occurs when Valerian is captured by the Persians in 260; Britain, Gaul and Spain have broken away under Postumus; and much of the east has broken away into the Palmyrene empire under Zenobia. Endemic pressure from Sassanid Persians. A series of brilliant generals starting with Claudius Gothicus and Aurelian restore the territorial integrity of the empire, but it remains a military despotism. In the West, empire-wide trade declines and goods production becomes more parochial.

**Tetrarchy and House of Constantine**  
Diocletian reforms decades of military and administrative extemporization into a new system of two emperors and two designated successors (the Tetrarchy), in an authoritarian government: the Dominate, where the emperors are near-gods. It collapses into civil war after his retirement. The winner, Flavius Valerius Aurelius Constantine, himself bequeaths an unstable dynastic inheritance. Society moves towards a lord-tenant feudal foundation. Defence in depth adopted: central forces meet incursions within the empire, not pre-emptively.

**House of Valentinian and Theodosius**  
The last great house of Rome, a family of emperors interwoven by marriage and descent. During this period, the empire definitively splits into two halves, and both are engaged with continuous barbarian and Sassanid incursions. Army mainly consists of barbarian recruits, with an emphasis on cavalry.

Pertinax is the first emperor born the son of a freedman.  
197. Battle of Lugdunum (Severus vs Albinus), possibly the largest Roman civil war battle ever fought, involving 75% of the entire army.

Rival emperor in Britain.  
First emperor from the equestrian class, and the first never to visit Rome while emperor.

First emperor to rise from the ranks, and first from the Danubian provinces. Concentration on the welfare of the army above all else.  
First formal division of power on territorial grounds.  
First emperor to die in battle against a foreign foe. Significant German incursions.

City of Rome now a mere provincial centre.  
Breakaway empire in Gaul, Spain and Britain.

Breakaway empire in Gaul and Britain.  
Son of Maximian. Breakaway empire in Italy, Spain and Africa.

Breakaway empire in Gaul.

Valentinian is the last great emperor of the West.  
Gratian discards the title of Pontifex Maximus. First use of state power to execute a heretic, Priscillian.

First emperor raised by a barbarian general, Arbogast the Frank.

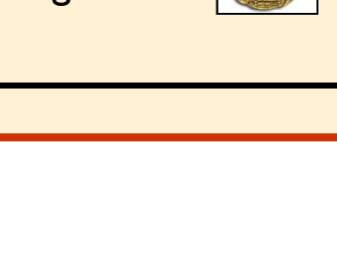
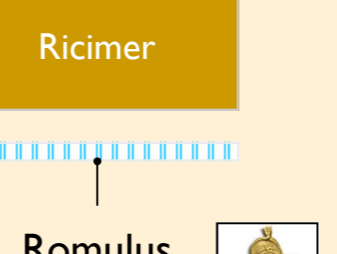
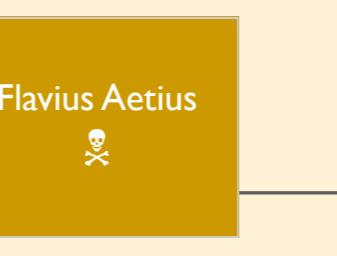
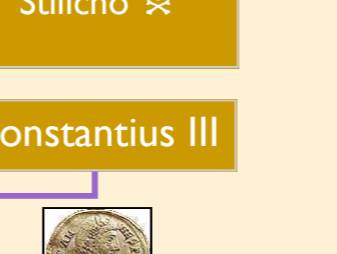
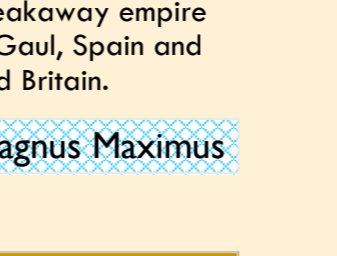
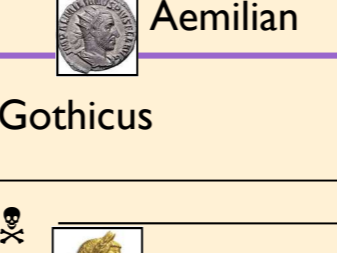
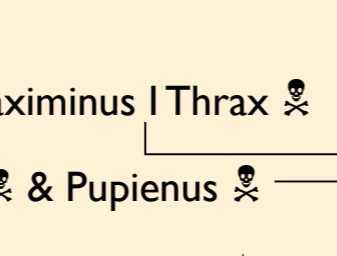
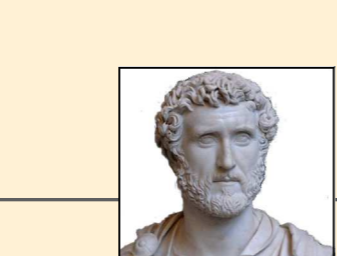
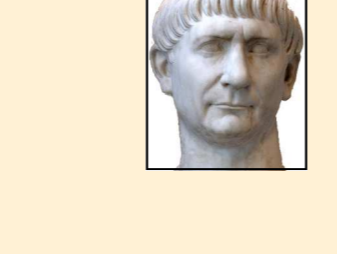
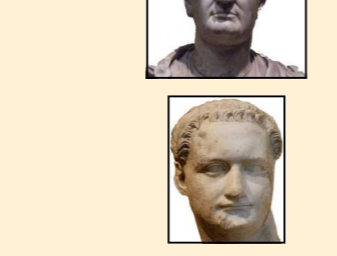
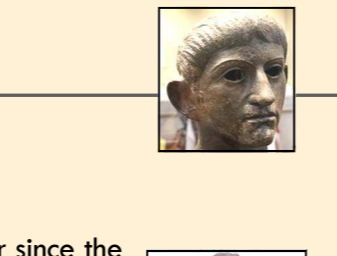
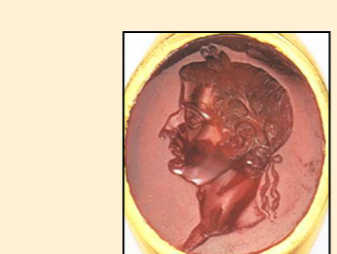
Capital moved to Ravenna for defensive reasons, an admission of the West's failure. 405-408: Second wave of Germanic refugees fleeing from the Huns. Alans, Vandals and Suevi cross the Rhine in mass. They pillage Gaul and move to Spain.

Huns under Attila raid both parts of the empire. Vandals under Gaiseric leave Spain and capture North Africa, breadbasket and richest province of the Western empire.

468. Naval battle of Cape Bon. A massive military expedition from both halves of the empire to regain the rich provinces of Africa is defeated by the Vandals, sealing the economic fate of the West. Last major military effort by the West. Eastern treasury drained.

476: Odoacer, leader of the Germanic foederati in Italy, proclaims King of Italy. He deposes Romulus, executes his father Orestes, and ignores Nepos, the disgraced and exiled candidate of the Eastern empire. Nepos rules a rump state in Dalmatia until 480.

Routine use of judicial execution. Treason redefined as any threat to the imperial family.



Golden Age of Latin literature.

Ancient Roman legislative and electoral assemblies dissolved.

Titus

Nerva

First non-Italian emperor. Empire reaches greatest extent.

Classical paganism starts to decline as people embrace the esoteric mystery religions, or philosophical positions, such as Stoicism. However, classical paganism remains as the provider of the rituals supporting and defining the Roman state. Army no longer manned mainly by Italians (let alone Romans), but almost entirely provincial.

Hadrian moves the empire from a Roman-dominated hegemony to an international polity. Italians lose their pre-eminent place in imperial administration.

Motivated by a shortage of slaves, more humane laws for them are passed. Silver Age of Latin literature: Juvenal, Petronius, Pliny, Tacitus.

Antoninus is the only emperor for whom we have a single biographical source.

Marcoan wars. Germanic raids into Italy: first invasion of Italy since 101 BC. Antonine Plague, probably smallpox. Widespread fatalities within empire and adjoining barbarians.

100-400. Mithraism a major religion and rival to an emergent Christianity.

Senate and old political elite decline into irrelevance. Worst purges since Tiberius and Domitian.

Army expanded. Beginnings of a military state.

Sassanids overthrow Parthians in Persia. They become the most important standing threat to the empire, requiring constant vigilance, and diverting military manpower from European barbarian threats.

Last flowering of classical thought. Neoplatonism: Plotinus, Porphyry.

Decius conducts the first organised persecutions of Christians.

Plague of Cyprian, probably smallpox. Inflation and failure of government revenues.

In a short reign, Aurelian (Restitutor Orbis) brilliantly defeats numerous internal and external threats, saving the empire from disintegration. He founds the cult of Sol Invictus, moving society to monotheism away from classical paganism; and carries out economic reforms. First substantial use of Germanic soldiers drawn from outside the empire to man the army.

Tacitus is the last emperor raised by the Roman Senate.

Massive economic and administrative re-organisation of the empire, restoring civil government. Civil governors now trained professionals, not members of the senatorial class. Military commanders made separate roles. Proto-feudalism: rural inhabitants tied to their locations, trades made hereditary. Italy loses its ancient tax concessions.

303-311. Diocletian conducts the Great Persecution of Christians.

280-400 and beyond. Manichaeism a major religion. Founded by the Persian Mani c. 250, it fused elements of Christianity, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism into a major world religion, and remained a rival to Christianity until its suppression by Theodosius I.

Constantine, greatest general of his age, ends the persecution of Christians by ordering toleration of all religions. He converts to Christianity and starts the institutionalisation of the Church. Praetorian guard abolished. Sound gold coinage established. Increasing use of Germanic soldiers to man the army. Decline of imperial trade. Cities revert to self-sufficiency.

Final stand of classical paganism under Julian.

376: First wave of Germanic refugees are admitted to the Eastern empire, fleeing from the Huns. 378. Battle of Adrianople vs Visigoth refugees. Much of the eastern army destroyed. End of the old Roman infantry legion. Visigoths settle within the empire armed and with tribal structures intact.

Unable to find cavalry manpower from within the empire, the emperors hire foederati or Huns to fight. Rise of barbarian generals to political dominance.

Visigothic foederati under Alaric rebel, rampaging through the East then Italy. In 410 they sack Rome, traumatising the empire's elites and intellectuals. They eventually settle in Gaul.

The Theodosian walls are constructed to protect Constantinople, a service they faithfully perform for more than a thousand years.

Further measures against rural inhabitants. Repressive taxation.

Hunnic empire collapses.

Zeno persuades the Ostrogoths under Theodoric Strabo to leave for Italy. Eastern empire permanently freed from the domination of barbarians and their generals.

**Flavians**  
In 68 AD a series of revolts broke out against Nero, last heir of the Julio-Claudians: "for now had been divulged that secret of the empire, that emperors could be made elsewhere than at Rome" (Tacitus). The victor was Titus Flavius Vespasianus. Imperial defence became reliant on widely-scattered frontier forces.  
**Antonines**  
Immediately after the assassination of the heirless Domitian, the senate enthroned the elderly Marcus Cocceius Nerva. Most of the Antonines, lacking male heirs, chose worthy and capable successors. "If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus. The vast extent of the Roman empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom" (Edward Gibbon). Height of empire, but intellectually torpid.

**Key to the Emperors**  
☠ Died in battle. ✨ Brilliant administrators or reformers. ☠ Assassination or suicide. 🤪 Barking mad destructive lunatics.

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Main source: M. Grant, The Roman Emperors, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London, 1985. Additional material from The History of Rome podcasts thehistoryofrome.typepad.com.

The Julio-Claudians assiduously intermarried with the old republican families, but also had them executed when necessary to preserve their power. With the end of the dynasty, the remnants of these ancient families (the nobles) lost the domination of the political process they had maintained since the creation of the Republic over 500 years earlier.

Domitian derives his legitimacy not from the senate, whom he excludes from all decision-making, but from the gods. The imperial court is no longer fixed in Rome, but moves with the emperor. Start of the decline of the city of Rome as the seat of empire.

132-136. Second Jewish revolt. Diaspora.

259. Battle of Edessa vs Persians. Entire army destroyed. Nadir of Roman fortunes.

297. Battle of Adrianople vs Visigoth refugees. Much of the eastern army destroyed. End of the old Roman infantry legion. Visigoths settle within the empire armed and with tribal structures intact.

410. Sack of Rome by Visigoths. Traumatizing the empire's elites and intellectuals. They eventually settle in Gaul.

476. Odoacer, leader of the Germanic foederati in Italy, proclaims King of Italy. He deposes Romulus, executes his father Orestes, and ignores Nepos, the disgraced and exiled candidate of the Eastern empire. Nepos rules a rump state in Dalmatia until 480.

480. Zeno persuades the Ostrogoths under Theodoric Strabo to leave for Italy. Eastern empire permanently freed from the domination of barbarians and their generals.

527. Justinian I begins his reign. He restores the empire to its greatest extent, and is the last Roman emperor to rule in the West.

529. Justinian I closes the Platonic Academy in Athens, ending classical paganism.

554. Justinian I reconquers the Western Roman Empire, restoring the empire to its greatest extent.

562. Justinian I dies. His son Justin II succeeds him.

602. Justin II dies. His son Justinian II succeeds him.

610. Justinian II is deposed. His son Constantine III succeeds him.

641. Arab Muslims conquer the Levant and Egypt.

678. Arab Muslims conquer the Levant and Egypt.

711. Arab Muslims conquer the Iberian Peninsula.

751. Arab Muslims conquer the Sicily.

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762. Arab Muslims conquer the Sicily.