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Two Cheers for *Ancient Rome*!!

A Christian Reappraisal
of the *Evil* Empire...

Fall, 2017, Eric Wright, Ann Arbor Christian Reformed Church

“O Tempora o Mores!”

(“*Oh! What a world we live in!*”) – Cicero

“*The past is never dead.*

It's not even past.” – William Faulkner

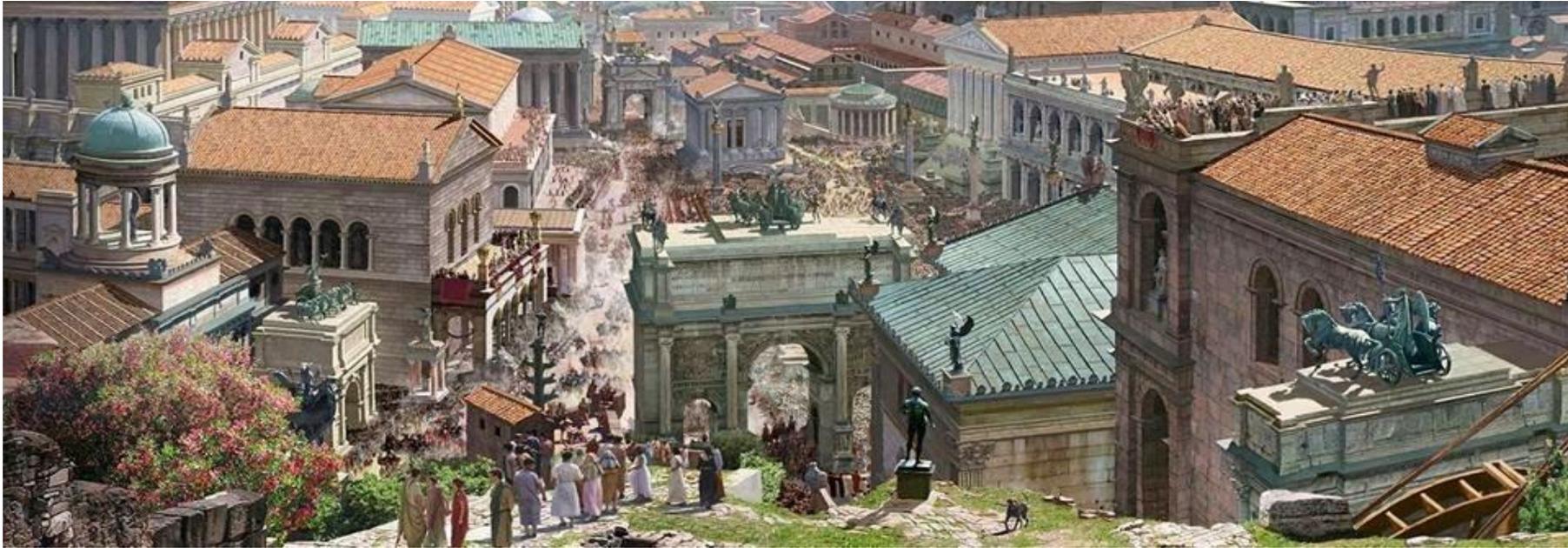
Three Sessions:

I. Introduction to Roman culture, historical approach, general questions and issues. (October 15, 2017).

II. Rome in its Historical context.
(October 22, 2017).

III. Christianity in the Roman world. (October 29, 2017).

IV. Further questions and *our* current assessment of ancient Rome! (November 5, 2017).



FIRST SESSION, October 15, 2017

✦ *Introduction to Roman culture, historical approach, general questions and issues.*

Guiding Questions:

I. What does ancient Rome mean to a contemporary Christian?

II. Can ancient Rome be assessed fairly, without heroizing or demonizing that culture?

III. What can a dialogue with this past reveal to Christian believers in our own time?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvPbj9NX0zc>

{Monte Python, “*What Have the Romans Ever Done for Us?*”}



Eric Wright's operating principles for the study of history:

I. "History is always *someone's* history."
– N.T. Wright

II. Context – Projection – Exceptions. (To understand historical events and characters, one must understand the overall context in which these events take place. We tend to project onto the past what we want to see/think/believe. For every historical proclamation, there are frequently *some* exceptions and outliers that “showcase” a counterexample.) – E. Wright



III.

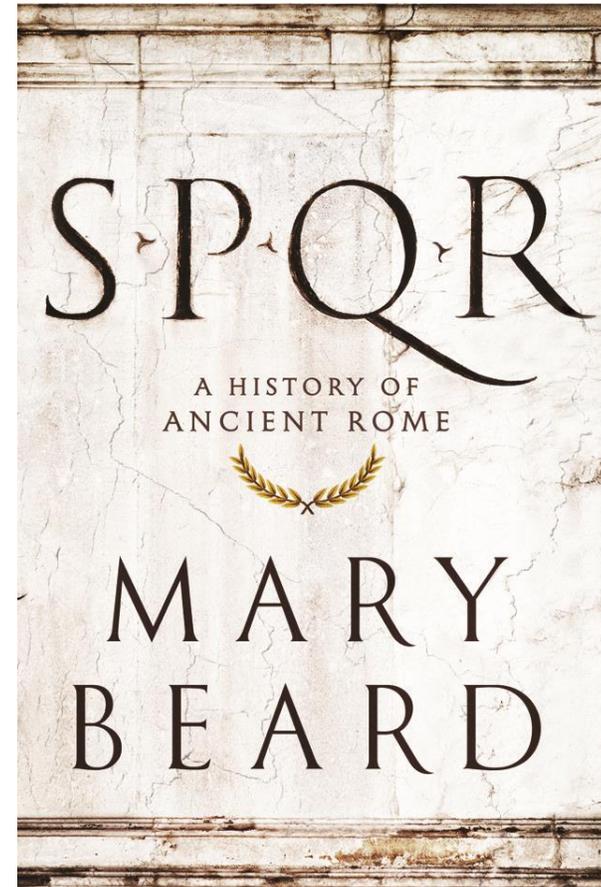
Nothing is inevitable. Rome didn't *have* to fall, and the middle ages didn't *have* to end, either. (Some might say they haven't...) "Progress" is not a given!

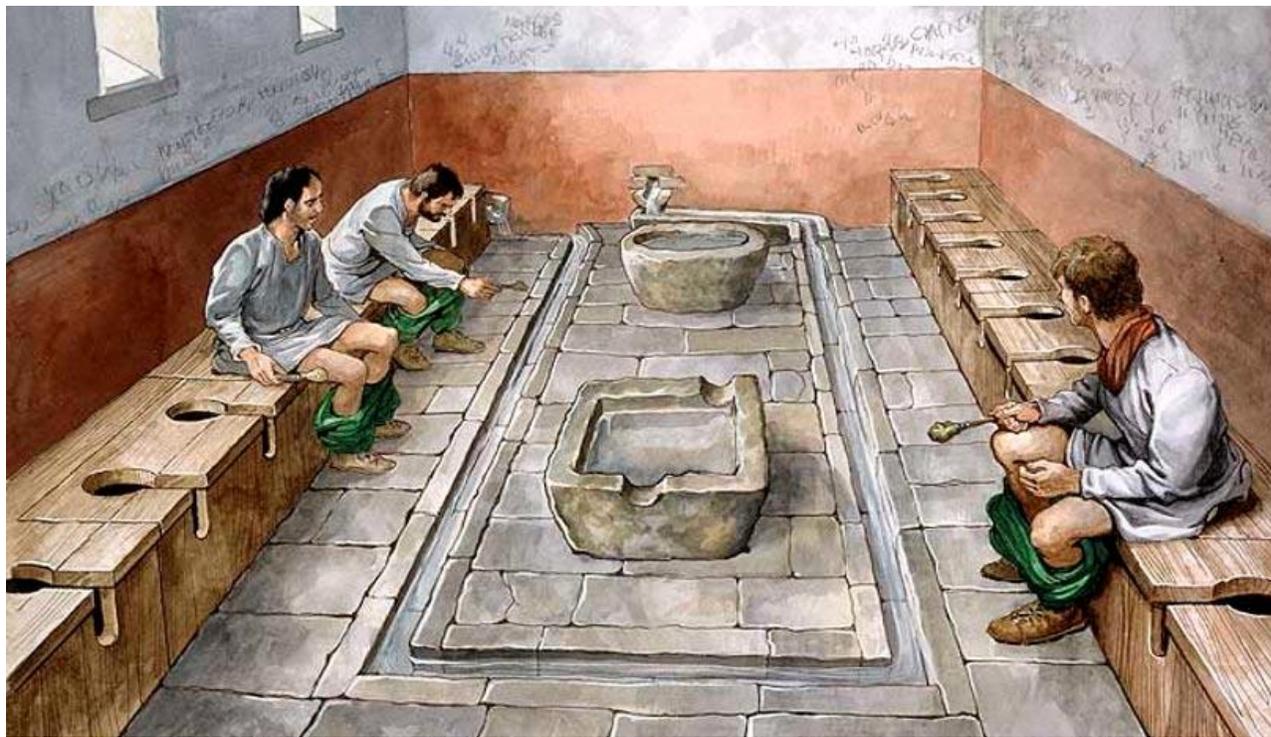
IV. All “facts” are (almost always) **time and place specific**, not (always) *universal*. [“Decimation” example.]

V. “There is **no single story** of Rome; no single founding myth.” – Mary Beard

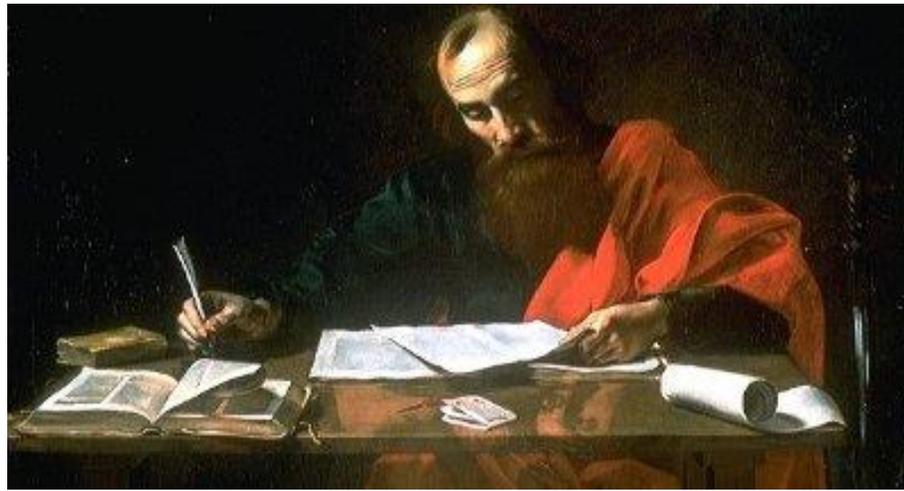
VI. I will be largely an amateur paraphraser of Mary Beard’s work, from *S.P.Q.R. – A History of Ancient Rome*, and two videos, *Meet the Romans*, and *Ultimate Rome, Empire Without Limit*, along with **many other sources**.

Dr. Mary Beard & *S.P.Q.R.* – *A History of Ancient Rome*





VII. Beard (and others) represent **contemporary historical writing**: urbanized, Malthusian, economic, transactional (Scheidel, Garnsey, Saller, Temin, Rostovtzeff) – as opposed to the older, “traditional” account of Roman history of overturning haughty kings, repelling foreign invaders, “Roman resilience,” ambition, divine providence, and decadence swallowing civic virtue. It is “history against the grain.” (Postmodern). It is, in my opinion, *much* more interesting, without sacrificing any of the intrigue and grandeur of Rome’s actual history – which is still, fantastic and at times outright implausible, as actual history sometimes is.



Importance of Ancient Rome:

I. The Roman Empire is **the context of the New Testament**, the world of Jesus.

II. There are **theological implications** about government and power that require some understanding of the Roman world to gain a fuller understanding of Biblical passages.



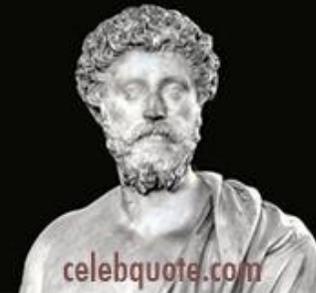
III. Ancient Rome laid the foundation for western **politics**, current national **boundaries**, architectural **engineering**, scientific and vernacular **language**, and **military ambition**. **Many European dictators aspired to restore the glory of the Roman Empire; this was an ongoing project from the Renaissance through the 20th Century**

An observation: depending on which historian or “expert” you study, you can acquire a different perspective, a different orientation about ancient Rome. We portray the Romans we want, and there plenty of examples of each: **decadent**, corrupt, **practical**, **stoic**, or **invincible**.



THE BEST REVENGE
IS TO BE UNLIKE HIM
WHO PERFORMED
THE INJURY

Marcus Aurelius

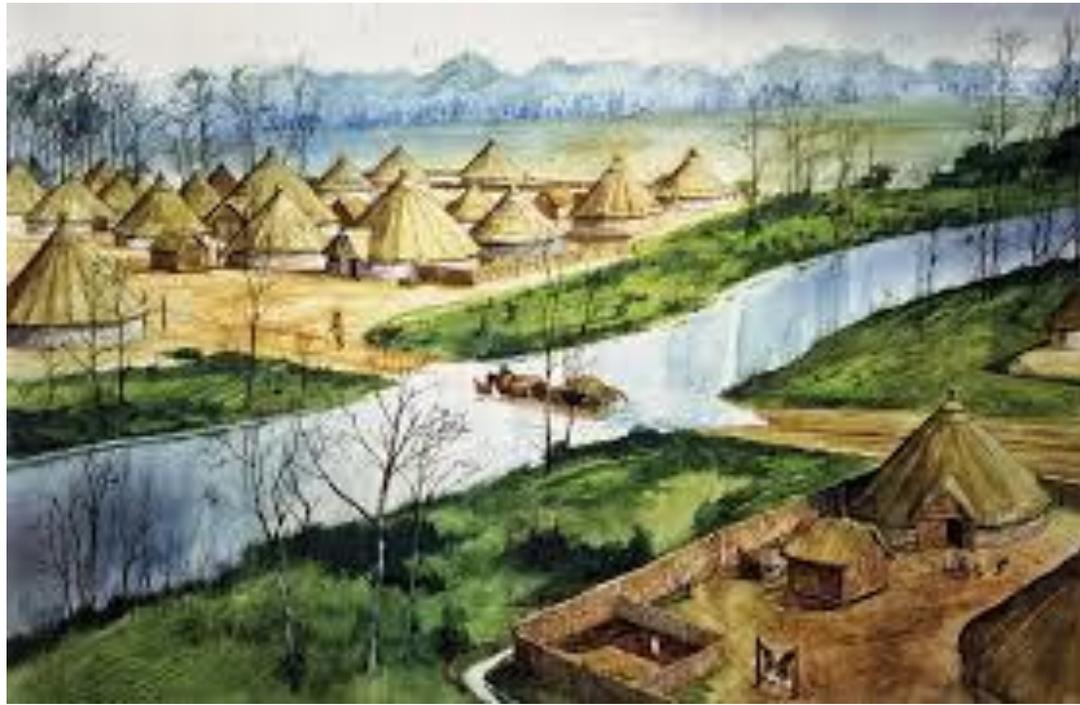


celebquote.com

 Theories of why Rome “fell” say as much about the people formulating such theories as they do about actual Rome. Much recent scholarship and archeology [new manuscripts, cargo shipwrecks, drilled ice caps, human excrement at Herculaneum, microbes in elephant dung in the alps] has shed new light on the era.

A *Procession* of *Particulars*...





I. *Historians still argue (among other things)...* how a tiny, unremarkable village on the Tiber grew to dominate 3 continents.

II. ...what the original motivations were for such expansion.

III. ...how and why Rome expanded in 390 B.C. after a Gallic invasion.

IV. ...who first proposed, unlike every other ancient empire, that the Romans employ a very successful policy of *assimilating* their vanquished foes and conscripting them into military service on a track to full citizenship. This pattern of assimilation, "...kept the empire safe from attack from other populations." (Merelli).



VI. ...why there's a “redundant twin” in the Romulus Remus foundation myth. (A weird story.)

VII. Romulus and Remus founding myth quite odd, and sadly prophetic: more Romans died at the hands of other Romans than all other enemies *combined!*
Romulus and Remus origin myths eerily prophetic! Rape of the Sabine's:
another strange origin “story”...



VIII. ...why the Emperor Caracalla chose to grant citizenship to all free inhabitants of the empire in 212, C.E., which eroded differences between conquerors and conquered. (This would not have been necessary as a means merely of increasing taxable income).



IX. ...why Constantine chose Christianity (did he have a authentic religious experience, as “traditional, orthodoxy” maintains, or was it *expedience*? (Does it matter?) He could have chosen Manichaeism, Mithraism, the cults of Isis or Cybele, Zoroastrianism, Judaism or even Buddhism!)
(We know *how*, not “*why*” historically.)



X.

...Hannibal's actual route through the Alps.



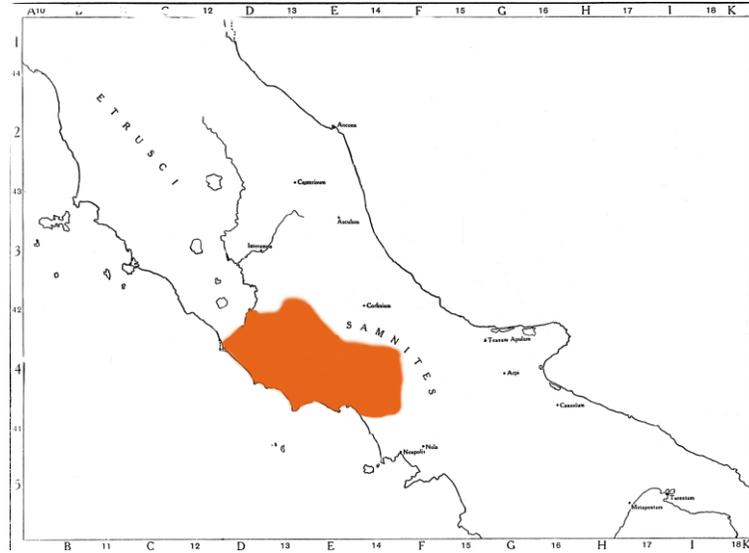
"Turn right at the *Robinia pseudoacacia*,
pass the garden with the *salvia officinalis*,
cross the road when you see the *stranvaesia*
dauidinia and the pub is on the left!"

X. ...why, how – or even *if* – the
“Roman Empire *fell*.”

XI. ... What did being “Roman” mean for Romans? (Answers depend on *who* you might have asked! “... ‘the Romans’ were as divided about how they thought the world worked, or should work, as we are. There is no simple Roman model to follow.” - Beard)

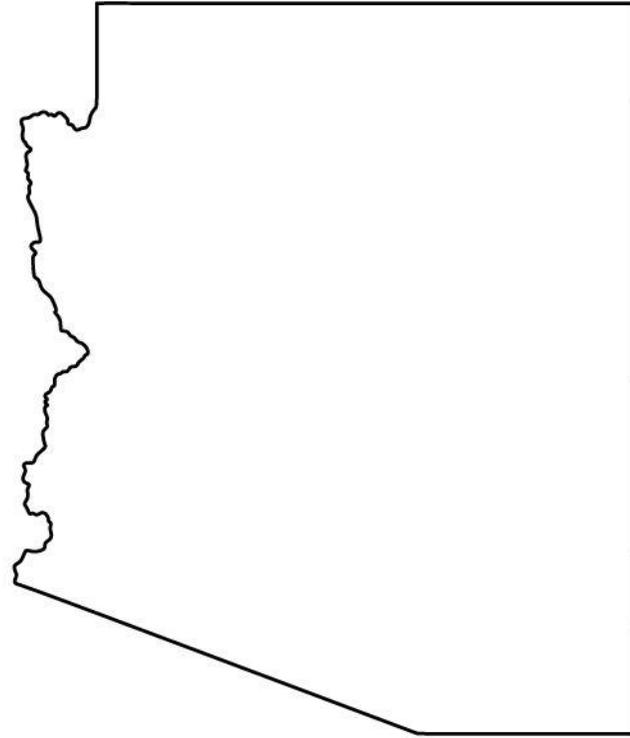


XII. S.P.Q.R. stands for, “*Senatus PopulusQue Romanus*” (“The Senate and People of Rome.”) It is the oldest continuously used acronym in world history.

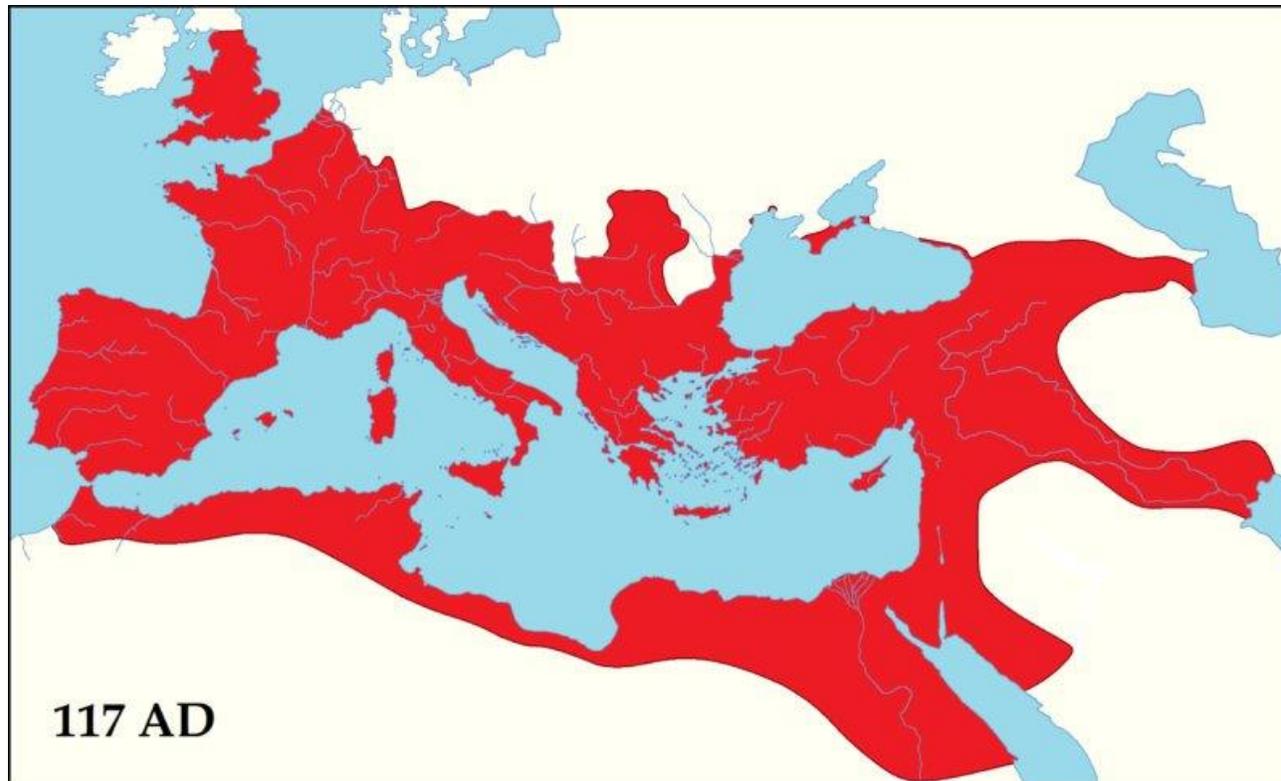


XIII. The traditional date for the founding of Rome is 753 B.C.E.; the establishment of the Republic, 509 B.C.E.; and 27 B.C.E. is the beginning of Rome's Empire, which lasted in the west to 576 C.E. (The Eastern Roman Empire, in Constantinople, lasted until 1453).

XIV. **Italy's** land area (250 miles wide, 730 miles long) equals that of the state of **Arizona**.



XV. By A.D. 117, during the reign of the Emperor Trajan, the Roman Empire reached its greatest extent, an area equivalent to 60% of the contemporary continental United States.



XVI. The city of Rome is only 10 miles from the Mediterranean Sea.



XVII. Rome probably expanded (“rose”) because of...

I. “Favorable conditions for production and trade,” (Scheidel). The Mediterranean basin, after it had been “conquered” was transformed into a “private” Roman waterway with safer, faster, more profitable shipping.

II. An extensive tax and redistribution apparatus (the state, along with corruption...) (Keith Hopkins); &...

III. *Geography* supporting sea trade, extensive prior to the empire at its height (supported by discoveries of countless shipwrecks throughout the Mediterranean Sea).



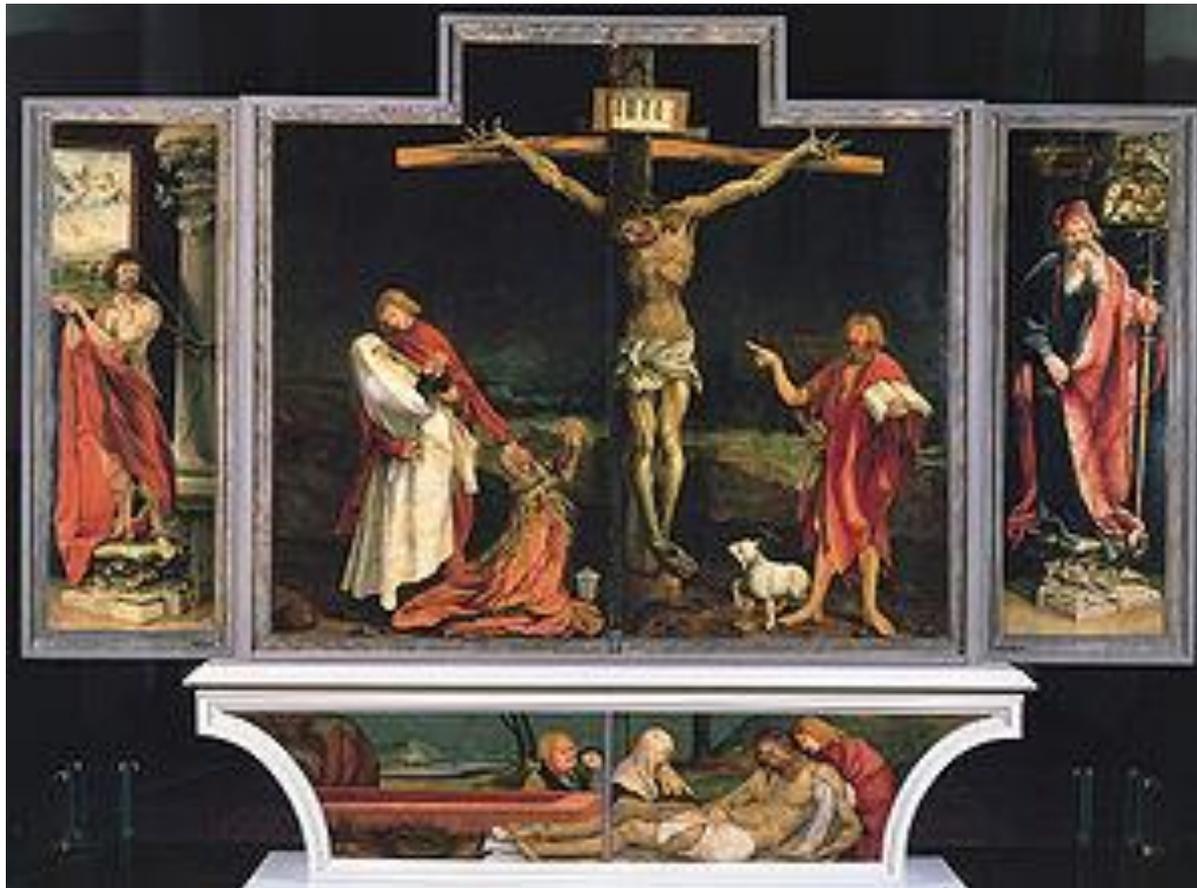
XVIII. Contemporary Roman historical study is enhanced by archaeology. Ancient histories (Plutarch, Tacitus, Polybius, Etc.) frequently pass our “social-scientific” muster, even though many were, “...composed centuries after the fact and without ready access to primary sources.” (Brendan Boyle)

IXX.

1. There are no histories of Rome written during its initial expansion in the 4th Century, B.C.E. Rome's first historians did not write until the 1st Century B.C.E.
2. Rome's earliest citizens were criminals and runaways. Turning foreigners into Romans was a dominant pattern throughout Republican and Imperial history, but it was not without controversy (Social War, ambivalence toward "Greek" culture – despite adopting so much of it(!), increasingly localized, alien armies away from Rome.)



XX. Once Caracalla's "Antonine Decree" for universal citizenship was adopted, almost at once it became "irrelevant," as new social divisions emerged (*honestiores* vs. *humiliores*, based on wealth, class, and status).



XXI. Jesus was not a Roman citizen, which is *why* he could be crucified. Roman citizenship in the era of Jesus was not granted in general to inhabitants of Judea. Paul, according to the New Testament, uses the fact that his birth city, Tarsus, did give him citizenship, and to appeal his case to the emperor.



XXII. In 50 B.C.E., Rome had 1.5 – 2 million slaves in Italy (rough estimate). Many slaves lived better than the common poor. (At any given time, at least 1/4 of Roman population were slaves).



XXIII. By 200 C.E., the Roman Empire had approximately 50-60 million people. The city of Rome was about a million at its greatest extent, +/- (and these numbers are still hotly debated.) The Roman Empire at its height was (approx.) 30 million. (Sometimes 50-60 million are cited).



XXIV. There was no organized refuse collection *or* official police force in the city of Rome... There was also no soap (olive oil and also urine was used.) The first tomato in Italy is not mentioned until at least 1548 (brought by Conquistadors from the New World).



XXV. Pollution from a silver mine in ancient Roman Spain has been measured using 20th century ice borings taken in Greenland.

XXVI.

Three factors led to the **end of the Roman Republic**:

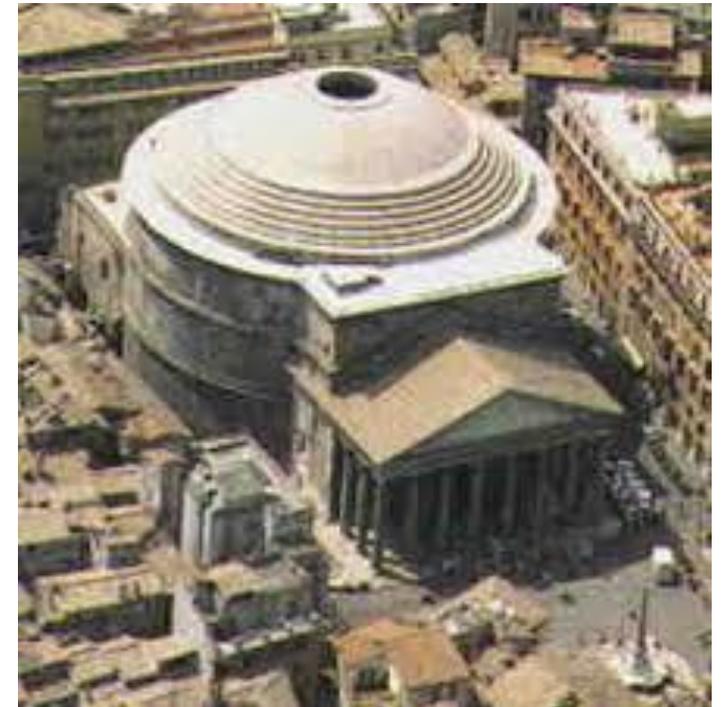
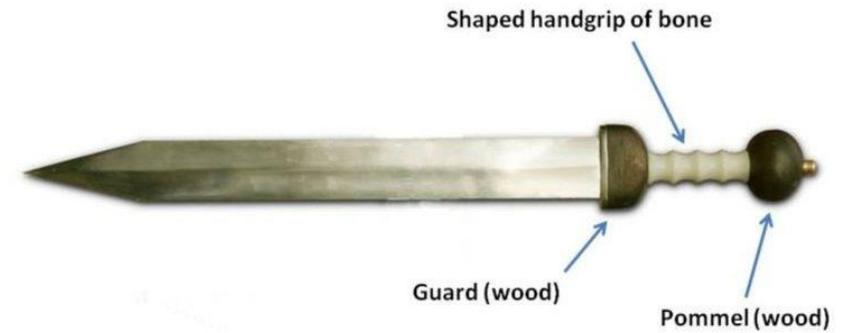
1.) **Massive disparities in wealth.**

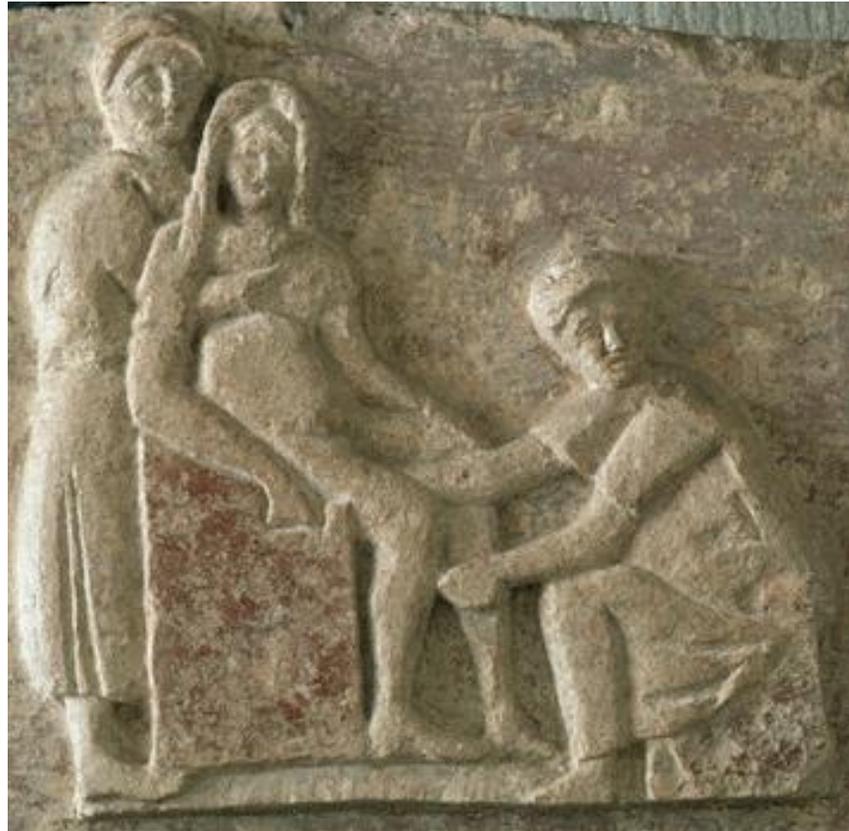
2.) Mistrust of the Senate partially caused by the military reforms of Gaius Marius, which increased loyalty of soldiers to their generals and not to Rome itself (the rise of private armies) [Granted, the “Marian reforms” also made the Roman military more agile and efficient, and enabled them to become an imperial power.]; and...

3.) **Power conflicts of the First Triumvirate (Julius Caesar, Crassus, and Pompey) – among *other* reasons.**

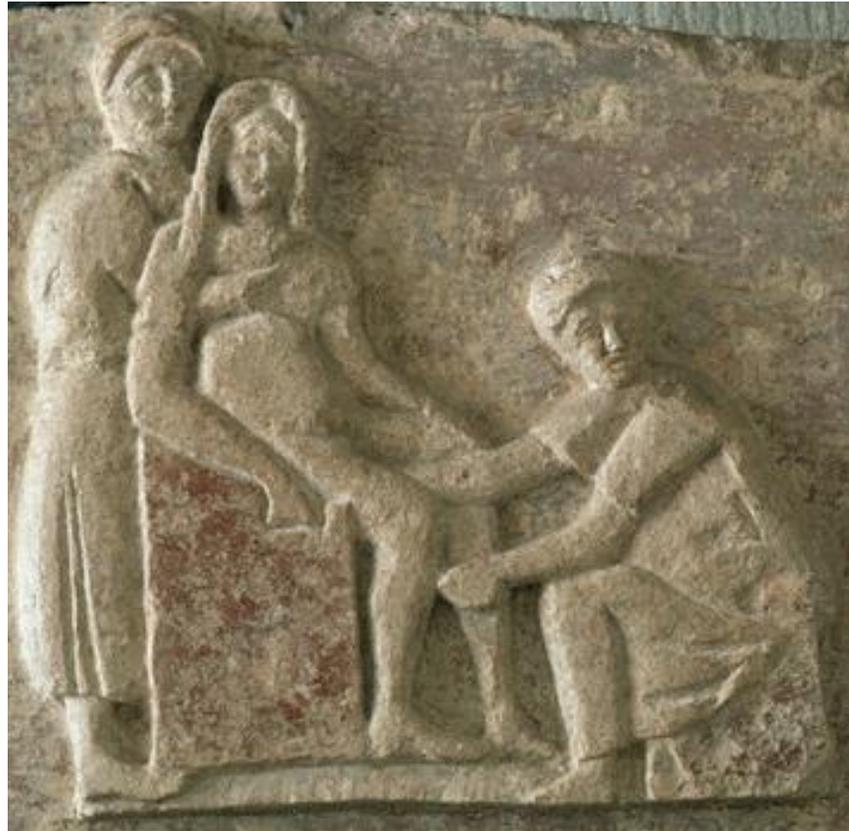
XXVII.

Roman inventions and engineering feats: roads, aqueducts, plumbing, concrete [cement is an *ingredient!*], concrete dome of Pantheon, and [2-ft.] short sword. However, **Romans were not especially known for technological innovation. “This is a problem for us [cultural critics and historians].” (Beard)**





XXVIII. Biggest killer of young women: 1 in 50 women died in *childbirth* (hemorrhage, obstruction, infection) in ancient Rome. [Based largely on records of the time.] Caesarians usually only removed fetus from dead mother.



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IXXX. One-half of children born would be dead by 10. If alive by 10, life expectancy was equal to our own. [Based on stats from later populations.] Each woman needed about 9 children to *maintain* the population!



XXX. Brutal Roman childrearing practices at odds with touching tomb epitaphs. The inscription under the portrait reads: “To the dearest Martial, a slave child, who lived two years, ten months and eight days. [For him] well deserving, Tiberius Claudius Vitalis provided [this monument]”.

98 - 117 A.D.

Fin.

Pt. I of IV

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