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Early Civilization in Italy

West of modern-day Greece lies a boot-shaped peninsula which extends 500 miles out into the Mediterranean Sea. Today this nation-state is known as Italy or *Italia* to those who live there.

In the ancient world, a civilization and culture developed there which was destined to become the strongest, most powerful, and most extensive empire in the history of the world. It was known as the Roman Empire.

The Roman Empire ruled for centuries over the entire Mediterranean region. The lands it controlled stretched from the northern coast of Africa to modern-day Germany; from the Caspian Sea in the east to the British Isles in the northern Atlantic Ocean.

The legacy of the Roman Empire is an involved one. The Roman government with its many emperors, both good and bad, had its problems. However, in

the days of the Roman Empire, peace and prosperity existed throughout its lands. Founded over a century before the birth of Christ, the Roman Empire did not collapse completely until the 400s A.D.

So much chaos and destruction followed the fall of the Roman Empire that, for nearly 1000 years, the people of western Europe looked back on the days of Rome as a time of peace and happiness.

The power that was Rome marked something new in the history of Western civilization. It was the first time the entire civilized West was under the control of a single government. Many of the political systems, traditions, and laws of the Romans continue into our own time.

But before there was a Roman Empire, there was a Roman Republic. And before there was a Roman Republic, there was only the city of Rome. Before

that, Rome existed as a small village in ancient Italy. What allowed Rome to become such a powerful place in Western civilization? How did Rome come to dominate the Mediterranean world?

Before we can answer that important question, we must first look at Italy before there was a Rome. Prior to 1000 B.C., Italy was home to few people. It was a backward place, inhabited by uncivilized tribes. In other parts of the ancient world, the great kingdoms of Egypt, Babylonia, and even the island of Crete were the centers of civilization.

After 1000 B.C., Italy was invaded by tribes

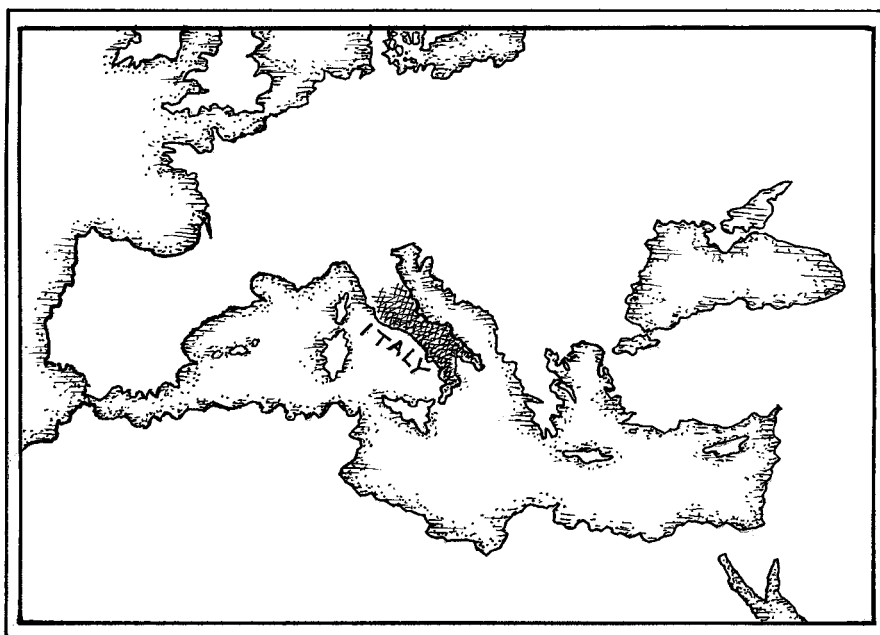
from the outside which carried iron weapons. These invaders easily took control of the small villages dotting the Italian landscape. There was no civilization there for these intruders to destroy, however.

In fact, these invaders were more advanced than the people they overwhelmed. It was through these

invasions that civilization came to Italy. Many of the invaders called themselves the Rasena. The Greeks called them the Tyrrhenoi. (Today, the waters off the southwestern coast of Italy are known as the Tyrrhenian (tih REE nee an) Sea .

Archaeologists today refer to these new inhabitants of Italy as the Etruscans (ee TRUS kanz). The lands they occupied were called Etruria (ee TROOR ee uh) and extended along the west coast of Italy between the Tiber and Arno Rivers. This region is known as Tuscany, a name derived from the word "Etruscans."

From these beginnings, civilization in a primitive form took root in Italy. What eventually developed was a power rivalry which allowed the people of a tiny village called Rome to rise to dominance. Their story is a fascinating one.



The Origins of Rome

History tells us little about the Etruscans, the first civilized people to enter Italy around 1000 B.C. Their language remains undeciphered, which makes it difficult to know much about them. Once they settled in Italy, they created a confederacy, or loose union, of cities between 700 and 500 B.C.

During this period of Etruscan influence in central Italy, other Mediterranean people were making their way to Italian shores. The Phoenicians lived along the eastern Mediterranean. They began colonizing extensively after 1000 B.C. far to the west. In 814 B.C., according to tradition, the Phoenicians established a trading city in northern Africa in the modern-day country of Tunisia. The city was called Carthage. (Today it is known as Tunis.)

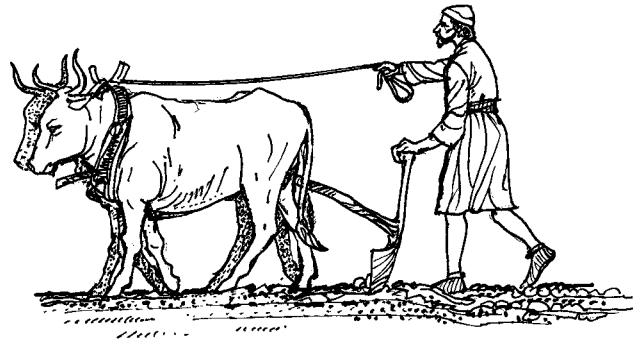
Carthage became one of the most important Phoenician cities in the Mediterranean. Its location put the Phoenicians within 250 miles of the toe of the Italian Peninsula and only 90 miles from the island of Sicily, just off the coast of Italy.

By the 700s B.C., the Greeks were busy establishing colonies in southern Italy. They created important city-states in that region which became great trading centers. Also during the 8th century, the Greeks and the Carthaginians began colonizing Sicily, each at opposite ends of the large, triangular island.

These three powers—the Etruscans, the Carthaginians, and the Greeks—controlled much of the trade on the Italian Peninsula by the middle of the 700s. During this period, a region south of Etruria known as Latium was home to approximately 30 villages whose inhabitants spoke the same language—Latin. One of these villages was known as Rome. Latium was organized into a defensive alliance known as the Latin League. At this time, Rome was not an important town even in the Latin League.

The origins of Rome are shrouded in myth. Legend has it that the village was founded by orphaned twins, Romulus and Remus, (who were raised by a she-wolf) in the year 753 B.C. However, archeology indicates that the site of Rome was occupied for centuries prior to that date.

By 600 B.C., Rome had developed along the Greek city-state model and was ruled by a chieftain



or king known as a *rex*. The king governed with the help of a council called a senate, which included members from the leading citizens of Rome. The word senate comes from the Latin word *senex* meaning “old man.”

By the 600s B.C., the Etruscans were dominating the Latin League, including Rome. Rome was greatly influenced by the Etruscans. Deities later identified as Roman gods and goddesses were originally Etruscan. The Romans developed their written language from the Greek, which the Etruscans introduced to them. The Roman monarchy was patterned after the Etruscan government. In particular, the Etruscan military, based on the Greek model of farmer-citizens (known as hoplites) who fought using the phalanx formation, was adopted by the Romans.

Roman society was also based on the Etruscan model. The Romans recognized two classes of citizens: the patricians, or the upper class, and the plebeians, which consisted of the small landowners and tenant farmers (those who worked someone else’s land). These classes remained important in Roman society for hundreds of years to follow.

After approximately a century of Etruscan control of Rome, a group of patricians drove out the last Etruscan ruler and proclaimed Rome an independent republic. The year was 509 B.C. This marked the beginning of a new era for Rome.

Review and Write

The Etruscans influenced the Romans in many ways. Why do you think Etruscan influence over Rome in the 6th century B.C. is considered so important?

The Roman Republic

For two centuries following the establishment of the Republic, the Romans found themselves almost constantly at war. With the removal of the Etruscan king, other rival city-states, former allies of Rome in the Latin League, tried to take advantage of Rome by invading her territory, putting Rome on the defensive.

In time, Roman forces conquered their neighbors and came to dominate the cities of the Latin League. They did not destroy these cities or even annex them as Roman territory. They made treaties with the conquered towns, permitting them to operate independently in local matters. However, in time of war, Rome expected the Latium cities to provide troops for the Roman army.

With nearly endless sources of troops, Rome continued its conquests throughout Italy. By 400 B.C., Rome prepared to strike against its Etruscan neighbors to the north. However, they were almost too late.

By this time Etruscan power was already in decline. Etruscans had been facing another enemy

from the north, the Celts, who had pushed their way into northern Italy as early as 500 B.C. (The Celts had already become dominant in western Europe in modern-day Germany, France, and the British Isles.)

One group of Celts, the Gauls, crossed the Alps into Italy after 500 B.C. and pushed the Etruscans out of the Po River valley in northern Italy. Each passing year brought the Gauls farther south into Etruria. It was during this period of declining Etruscan power that the Romans expanded throughout central Italy.

After 400 B.C., the Romans found themselves faced with a new enemy—the Gauls. On July 16, 390 B.C., a Gallic army defeated the Romans along the banks of the Allia River, just 10 miles north of Rome. (For centuries to follow, the Romans considered July 16 an unlucky day.)

With little opposition, the Gauls marched into Rome and occupied it. The city was looted, burned, and many senators were executed. After occupying much of the city for less than a year, the Gauls were convinced to leave after the Romans paid them 1000 pounds of gold. (Legend says that the Gauls used rigged scales and actually were paid more than 1000 pounds.) Eight centuries passed before Rome was again occupied by a foreign army.

For the remainder of the 300s B.C., Rome's most dangerous enemies were other Italic people living in central Italy. Chief among them were the Samnites, who lived in Campania, a fertile plain region south of Latium. In 343 B.C., Rome fought the Samnites in a series of wars, and the Romans won. For the first time, the Romans had no powerful enemy in Italy.

By 290 B.C., the Romans controlled all of Italy from the Celtic settlements in the Po Valley to the Greek trading colonies in the south. And after 265, these Greek city-states accepted Roman control.



Research and Write

The Romans were able to dominate all of Italy because they had a skilled and well-disciplined army. Research the Roman army. Why were Roman soldiers so effective? How were they organized?