Rome: Power and Glory – Episode 1: Rise of the Roman Empire

Introduction to Rome – 0:00-10:25

Over a thousand years after Rome’s fall, the armies of the French emperor Napoleon descend on the city. Napoleon’s forces have already battled their way through Europe. To take Rome seems an afterthought. By this time it’s a backwater. But for Napoleon it has an almost religious significance. He claims he’s the spiritual descendant of the Roman emperors. He has himself painted wearing the Roman crown of laurels, as if Rome still rules the world. His troops march unopposed into the city. It’s like walking into a ghost town. They find the frightened Romans huddling among the ruins of the ancient city. Crumbling palaces and arches still seem to echo the magnificent triumphs they were built to celebrate. Goats and cattle graze where thousands once thronged the streets.

In 70 AD, when the emperor Vespasian started building the massive Colosseum, Rome was ten times larger than the city Napoleon found. Vespasian wanted a great theater for the gory spectacles Romans so loved. The scale of the Roman games, like the scale of Rome itself, was staggering. The Colosseum had seating for 45,000, and standing room for 20,000 more. In one series of games, 5,000 people and 11,000 animals were slaughtered. Nothing in Hollywood could compare with this gruesome splatter-fest. The blood and brutality were all too real, and the Romans were addicted to it.

“When he saw the blood, rather than turn away, he fixed his eyes on the scene and took in all its frenzy. He reveled in the wickedness and the fighting and grew intoxicated with bloodshed. When he left the arena, he took with him a sick mind, which left no peace until he came back again.” – St. Augustine

“They did get excited watching gladiators kill one another. I’m not denying it. But, you know what, so do we. I think, for example, of the brouhaha over Mike Tyson. What Mike Tyson did when he bit Evander Holyfield’s ear, that would have been applauded in the Roman arena. That’s great, that’s what you were supposed to do. In fact, you were supposed to rip the ear off and march around the arena with it in your mouth. That’s what you’re supposed to do.” -- Professor Shelley Haley

Rome’s savagery was matched by its size. When the Colosseum was built, Rome was a city of a million people and growing. Not until London in the 19th century would a city approach this size again.

“What I think you’d notice, if a time traveler went back, would be the smell, the noise, the dirt, the crowdedness. There lots of beggars, lots of signs of sickness and disease. Lots of small children. It would be rather like Calcutta, or Rio, a crowded modern town, very poor, with these monumental buildings in the center, expressing the wealth and the power of the Empire.” – Professor Keith Hopkins

“Traffic was terrible. Julius Caesar forbade wheeled traffic during the day so people could move around, which mean that at night all these carts started going on these stone streets, and it was so noisy you couldn’t sleep.” – Professor Diane Favro

To manage the problem of organizing such a huge concentration of people, the Romans invented the science of urban planning. They invented cement, built gigantic public storehouses, and installed city-wide sewage systems. But their greatest achievement was the water supply.
“The aqueducts of Rome reached 60 and 70 miles into the hills to guarantee continual flow of fresh water into the city. That flow of fresh water provided enough water, gallons per person per day, that was not equaled by the city of Rome until the 1950’s.” – Professor Richard Brilliant

Along with millions of gallons of water, Romans consumed a staggering eight thousand tons of grain weekly. Supertankers, each carrying a thousand tons of grain, crisscrossed the Mediterranean. They were the largest ships built until the Atlantic steamers of the 19th century.

The city of Rome was the heart of an empire that stretched from Scotland to Syria. Never has the western world been better organized or more united. In the year 100 AD, you could travel from Egypt to France on paved roads, with only one currency and one passport in your pocket.

And this vast, well-organized empire would muster the largest army the world had ever seen: over half a million soldiers. Rome was the superpower of the ancient world.

Later superpowers never stopped learning the lessons of its spectacular rise and fall. Napoleon was not alone in his obsession with Rome.

Twenty years before Napoleon marched into Rome, on the other side of the Atlantic, a group of men were designing a political system for their new country.

“In designing the Constitution of these United States of America, we have at various times sought precedent in the history of that ancient republic, and endeavored to draw lessons both from its leading ideas, and from the tumult and factions which finally brought it low.” – Thomas Jefferson

“The American Founding Fathers spent most of their childhood and much of their adulthood reading the Latin classics. To the founders, the past was not something that was dead. It was something that was alive. Especially the Roman past was alive with personal and social meaning. This was crucial, I think, to the American Revolution because they were doing something really unprecedented in this revolution, and yet they were able to feel that they were not the first. The basis of our political system I think, lies in Rome.” – Professor Carl Richard

The western world grew up in Rome’s shadow. Its legends, its laws, its institutions, and its language. Napoleon said that the story of Rome is the story of the world. It’s a story of great commanders and politicians, men like Caesar, Augustus, Hadrian, and Constantine. But its also a story of the poor who bore the brunt of their leaders’ ambitions. It’s a story of vast idealism and an equally vast greed for power. And finally it’s the story of Rome’s spectacular fall and the chaos that followed. But behind all that, are the stories of Rome’s beginnings almost three thousand years ago in the lush hills of central Italy.

-- 18:50 -- Romulus and Remus

Most of what we know about the birth of Rome comes from the work of one man, one of Rome’s greatest historians, Livy. He lived in the reign of the emperor Augustus, over seven hundred years after the city was founded.

The glory of Rome was at its height, but Romans were already haunted by the specter of decline. The empire was emerging from decades of civil war. Bitterness and political intrigue were rampant. Decadence, greed, and profiteering were the order of the day. To men liked Livy,
raised on the Roman stoic virtues of valor, loyalty, and self-sacrifice, it seemed the spirit of Rome was rotting.

“I feel that indulgence has brought us through every form of sensual excess to be morbidly attracted to death in all its forms. Rome is at the dark dawning of an age in which we can neither endure our vices, nor face the remedies needed to cure them.” – Livy

A cure was what Emperor Augustus was looking for. He cracked down on dissent, and passed laws to punish immorality. He was determined to reform the Empire and force a return to Roman family values. Bawdy poets like Ovid, who wrote *The Art of Love*, were banished to the Asian steppes. When his own daughter Julia was rumored to have slept with half the senate, Augustus banished her as well.

“*Livy saw in Augustus, or in Octavian, a chance for the world to finally settle down and get back to business. What made Rome great to begin with – you gotta go back and look. Who were the heroes of the past, that made Rome the city she was?*” – Professor Richard Prior

“I hope that history may be the best cure for a sick mind. At least it can remind us of what we once were, and shows us the depths to which we are now sinking.” – Livy

Livy set out to write a brief history of early Rome, celebrating its glories and virtues, propaganda for the reforms of Augustus. What he had to go on were stories handed down over the centuries. They were a mixture of fact and legend.

“I, for one, am looking forward to absorbing myself in antiquity because I am so deeply tired of the modern world and all the troubles which torment it.” – Livy

He believed Rome’s mythological beginnings would reveal the stories of heroism and nobility Romans needed to hear. But the stories of Rome’s origins were short on stoic virtues and long on murder, rape, mayhem, and fratricide. To his dismay, Livy discovered they echoed the cruel realities of the Roman world of his own day.

Legends told that Rome was founded by Romulus and Remus, twins who were cast out into the wilderness to die. But the boys were said to be saved by a she-wolf who suckled them. They grew up like savages in the woods. When they returned to found the city of Rome, they were filled with the simple ferocious spirit of their wolf mother.

According to legend, Romulus and Remus then led their people to the bend in the river Tiber, where she found them. There Rome was born. The year was 753 BC. But hardly had they founded the city than the two brothers quarreled over who should be king. It was left to the augurs to decide.

Augurs were the priests of early Rome, who divined the will of the gods. They studied the movements of birds, the weather, the entrails of sheep, before making their pronouncements, known as the auguries. The augurs placed each brother on a hilltop, then waited. When birds flocked over Romulus, they knew he would be the first king of Rome.

But Remus refused the augury, and the brothers fought. Romulus killed him.

The first king of Rome, suckled by a wolf, bathed in his brother’s blood, walked away, furious and triumphant. It was a fitting augury for the bloodshed and strife that lay ahead.
“The story about Romulus killing his twin brother, at the moment of the founding of the city, is a very old story. It’s very, very remarkable that in the late Republic the Romans were fighting civil wars and of course it didn’t escape their notice that this seemed to be prefigured in the myth, with Romulus killing his brother. They actually thought this was a sort of curse on them, that they were fated to destroy each other.” — Professor Tim Cornell

“Well, the whole Roman psyche was based on violence. If you look at the foundation legends of Romulus and Remus, that’s based on fratricide. One brother kills another to found a city. And from that point it just escalates.” — Professor Shelley Haley

The violence of the early Romans, in fact and fiction, was born of desperation. In real life, shunned by neighboring tribes, Rome was forced to welcome outcasts, vagrants, and fugitives. And they lured their neighbors, the Sabines, to a ritual of peacemaking.

“And they’re all a pretty desperate lot, and Rome in the earliest community that is organized in that way, is a place where no one wants to go. So they haven’t got any women. That’s the first problem.” — Professor Tim Cornell

“And so the Romans, Romulus in particular, got an idea: New religious festival. Let’s invite the neighbors. Bring your wife and kids—especially the daughters.” — Professor Richard Prior

The Sabines were wary but accepted. As the festivities went on into the night, the Sabines relaxed their guard. It was what the Romans were waiting for. Romulus gave the sign, and they attacked. They grabbed the women and drove off the Sabine men, the ones they didn’t kill.

When painters of a later age portrayed the Rape of the Sabine Women, they imagined a classical city. They were wrong. The early Romans were primitive people struggling desperately to survive. The grim stories of the first Romans were as surprising to Livy as they are to us. They certainly didn’t provide the role models he was looking for.

His little book turned into one of the most monumental histories ever written. By the time he died in 17 AD, it had grown to 142 volumes, all written laboriously in wax. It had absorbed his entire life. Livy’s chronicle was the best seller of its day. It was more successful than he could ever have hoped, but had no effect whatsoever on the moral chaos of empire. Even 142 books were no match for the influence of so much power. By now Rome was a juggernaut, whose momentum was unstoppable. Its course set by its mythical beginnings, whether fact or fiction.

— 28:45 — Servius Tullius, Lucretia, and the Founding of the Republic

As it approached the fifth century BC, Rome was emerging from its legendary past into the real world of recorded history. It was now a thriving province of the Etruscan world, ruled by Etruscan kings. The primitive mud and thatch huts of Rome’s early days had given way to a city of brick. Rome was absorbing people from surrounding lands and growing fast. Etruscan and Greek traders met in its busy streets. Phoenician boats from Sicily and North Africa sailed the Tiber. Wine, olives, and gold flooded into Italy.

But Rome was still no different from any other prosperous cities of the Mediterranean. What first set it apart was not its capacity for trade or engineering or even warfare, but its ability to organize itself.
The man who reshaped Roman society was an Etruscan king called Servius Tullius. There are no statues of him. We have no idea what he looked like. He never became as famous as later rulers of Rome. But his mark on history may be even greater. And yet, all Servius Tullius did was carry out history’s first census.

“Now the census, the Roman census, is a very important institution. They would count the Roman citizens and list them and then distribute them in their appropriate classes and political units and so on. The census was a kind of way of grading Roman citizens according to their status and prestige.” – Professor Tim Cornell

In the sixth century BC the census detailed every Roman’s obligations to the city: to obey its laws, pay taxes, and do military service. But much more important, it also gave them rights. This was the great innovation of Servius. In proportion to their contribution, Romans were given a say in how their city was run. Servius sowed the seeds of representational government. He organized an assembly to govern the city and gave it a name: the Senate.

Finally, the census decreed that each of the city’s social classes should contribute a group of soldiers for Rome’s defense. They were called the legions, the fighting force that was going to put Rome’s destiny back in its own hands and one day give it the world.

The census didn’t create equality or democracy. Rome remained a society governed by kings and nobles. Women had few rights. But it created a level of organization unheard of in the ancient world.

No man did more for Rome than the Etruscan king Servius. His reforms laid the foundations for Rome’s greatest achievement, the creation of the Republic. But like so many Roman rulers, he was brought down by treachery and intrigue.

The king’s own daughter wanted her husband, Tarquin, on the throne. Her henchmen knew how to get him there. And after they murdered the great king, power and paranoia went hand in hand in Rome.

For almost two centuries Rome had been ruled by Etruscan kings and Etruscan nobility. Under Servius things had gone well. Under Tarquin, his successor, brutality and decadence flourished. While he and his relatives devoted themselves to pleasure, their henchmen carried out campaigns of political murder to remove any and all opposition.

Romans were beginning to hate everything the Etruscans stood for. Resentment smoldered.

A woman called Lucretia was the spark that would set it on fire. She was well loved and highly regarded for her kindness, beauty, and loyalty. She represented everything Romans felt they had and the Etruscans did not: honor, virtue, bravery.

One day, the king’s son and some of his Etruscan nobles were on a journey away from Rome. Drunk, they decided to creep back into the city and spy on the most beautiful women to see what they were up to. They found their own wives, as expected, partying. They found Lucretia hard at work.

“Because this was an indication of good, virtuous matronly behavior. This is how Roman women should behave. They should not be sleeping with 300 members of the Senate (like Augustus’
daughter allegedly did). They’re not supposed to be poisoning members of their family (as Livia allegedly did). They’re supposed to be producing cloth.” – Professor Shelley Haley

The next night, when he knew Lucretia’s husband was away. King Tarquin’s son crept back to her house, alone. With a knife at her throat, he raped her and swore that if she breathed a word of it, he’d kill her.

That would be unnecessary. The next day, too proud to live with her dishonor, Lucretia killed herself.

Romans went wild. Mobs tore through the streets and attacked the Etruscans wherever they found them.

A stern nobleman named Brutus organized a furious attack on the Etruscan king and his courtiers. They were overwhelmed and fled for their lives. Romans were finally free of their Etruscan overlords. Lucretia’s legacy to Rome was its freedom.

Romans vowed they would never again live under a king. So how exactly were they going to live? And how would they govern themselves? Their solution was momentous.

They declared that the affairs of Rome to the people, that citizens would vote, and that Rome would be a res publica, a public affair, a republic. Government would no longer be the business of kings. Rome would be ruled by laws and elected officials.

The first two elected leaders, called consuls, were Brutus and Lucretia’s widowed husband.

“And so a king was replaced with, first two praetors, eventually two consuls. With two, both of them in agreement on everything, elected annually so that no one person ever had very much power for very long at all. This paranoia about kings continues all the way through Roman history.” -- Professor Richard Prior

In ways he never could have imagined, Servius’ census had borne fruit. The new republic would be organized according to the voting categories and classes he put in place forty years earlier.

The birth of the Republic staked Rome’s claim to a place in history.

SPQR was the Republic’s banner. Senatus Populusque Romanus – the Senate and People of Rome. It was the ancient world’s first representational government. It paved the way for Rome’s glories and all democracies to come.

-- 40:30 -- Wars with Veii and Gaul, and the Story of Cincinnatus

Romans set themselves free from the Etruscans in 510 BC. Next, they needed to be sure they stayed free. So they set about building the fiercest fighting machine the world had ever seen. Now, it had its old masters to practice against.

For over a hundred years after Rome declared its independence, it was at war with the Etruscans, who fought desperately to regain their old possession. They failed. They were no match for the highly disciplined Roman legions who would fight to the death to defend Rome’s liberty.

As Roman soldiers fought for the Republic, a man named Publius codified its leading ideas. This legal system set a remarkable precedent for republics in the future. Two thousand years later,
“I think the American Revolution was an exciting period for the Founding Fathers. They were exited by the opportunity to match their ancient heroes’ struggles against tyranny, in a sense to rival the noble deeds they had spent their youth reading about. And they were thrilled by this idea, by this thought, that they were beginning anew the work of the ancient republicans. Only this time with an unprecedented chance of success.” – Professor Carl Richard

Throughout the 5th century BC, the struggle for the Republic went on. Rome and the nearest Etruscan city, Veii, faced each other across the Tiber in an endless stalemate of attack and counterattack. Finally, after decades of bitter skirmishing, a Roman army battled its way toward the Etruscan city. The year was 392 BC. Their goal was to take Veii by storm and once and for all, to bring an end to the Etruscan threat to Rome’s survival.

Etruscan soldiers fought furiously at the city walls. Priests prayed to their gods to save them from destruction, to no avail. The Romans smashed through the Etruscan defenses and laid waste to the city. They slaughtered the men and made slaves of the women.

It was Rome’s first great victory. There would be many more, each celebrated by the building of a triumphal arch, a monument to the glory of victory and the humiliation of the defeated. Rome now piled victory upon victory all across Italy, as one by one her neighbors fell to the legions. Rome’s rise was gathering momentum, and by now seemed unstoppable.

But she suffered one setback, which haunted the empire forever. The year was 386 BC. From beyond the Alps, horsemen appeared and thundered toward Rome. Romans called them barbarians. They were Celts from Gaul, present-day France. The Gauls were a warlike people, but this time they weren’t looking for battle. Wars with their neighbors had pushed them out of their own territory. Now they needed a new home.

Rome dominated central Italy, so the Gauls asked them for territory. Roman envoys refused point blank. Who did these barbarians think they were to presume upon Rome in this way? They had insulted the Gauls, which was a mistake. The Gauls descended on Rome in a fury. What they weren’t given, they would take.

The Romans were fierce warriors but had no idea how to fight these people, who charged into battle in a suicidal frenzy. Their savagery, even by Roman standards, was terrifying. Taken by surprise, the Romans barricaded themselves inside their city, and hoped these terrifying wild men would go away. They didn’t. The Gauls smashed their way into the city and ransacked it. The Romans only escaped being slaughtered by paying the Gauls everything they had to move and leave them in peace. Rome’s humiliation was complete. The words of the Gallic chieftain as he exacted his crushing payment would ring in Roman ears for centuries to come: “Woe to the vanquished!”

Rome rose from this devastation stronger, better organized, and more determined than ever. It forged an iron spirit and a civilized code of honor: the stoic virtues of valor, discipline, and self-sacrifice. That code produced soldiers and commanders with an unflinching dedication to duty.

One of the most famous was Cincinnatus. Cincinnatus was a Roman who came to embody the classic virtues like no other. Although a nobleman, he liked to work his fields with his own hands. One day, as he worked, a messenger arrived with news that Rome was being attacked.
“And in such an emergency situation as this, the Roman constitution called for the appointment of a dictator. Somebody would be elected by the people, but then once elected would have absolute power, life-and-death power, over all citizens, but only for a maximum of six months.” – Professor S. Thomas Parker

He dropped his plow, hurried to the city, took up command of the army, and was named dictator. He quickly won a great victory and returned to the city in triumph.

“Now he could have stayed on, and he could have used his power as he wished, but the very day he returned to the city, we’re told, he immediately resigned the office of dictator, walked back to his farm outside they city and continued to plow his farm. And the Romans loved to tell that story because here is a man who was totally selfless, who cared nothing for his own livelihood, for his own life, but merely wished to serve. And so it’s no accident that one of the most famous sculptures in American history is that of George Washington as a Cincinnatus.” – Professor S. Thomas Parker

“George Washington knew that many people compared him with Cincinnatus, and he liked that, and he consciously worked to encourage that image. And so for instance during the darkest periods of the war, when some thought maybe he should resign, he held off that resignation because he wanted to do like Cincinnatus did: wait until the enemy was defeated, and then in a big show, lay down his power. Which he did, and he retired to his own plow at Mount Vernon.” – Professor Carl Richard

Cincinnatus became the role model for the Roman politician commanders Napoleon so admired. He embodied the code of conduct that powered Rome’s rise and extended Rome’s dominion over the entire western world.

Rome’s battles abroad would highlight the conflict within its own soul: the struggle to resist the corrupting influence of so much power. It would haunt the empire for centuries to come. But first, Rome’s era of power and glory was about to begin.