

# An Empire Across Three Continents

## 1. Introduction & Sources

- The Roman Empire spread across **Europe, Fertile Crescent, North Africa**.
- **Mediterranean Sea** was the center; borders stretched:
  - North → Rhine & Danube rivers
  - South → Sahara Desert
- Roman Empire vs. Iranian Empire → rivals, divided by the Euphrates **River**.
- Roman historians used:
  - **Textual sources** – histories, letters, laws
  - **Documents** – inscriptions, papyri
  - **Archaeology** – buildings, remains

## 2. The Early Empire

- Two phases: **Early Empire** (1st–2nd centuries) & **Late Empire** (3rd century onward).
- **Languages:** Latin (West), Greek (East).
- **Institutions:** Emperor, Senate, Army.
- Emperors were seen as “leading citizens,” but the army often decided the fate of rulers.
- **Succession:** family descent or adoption, backed by the army.
- External wars reduced; expansion slowed → absorbed smaller kingdoms.
- **Urban centers:** key for taxation, administration, food supply, entertainment.
- Shift of power: from **Italy** → **provinces** (wealthier Mediterranean regions).

## 3. Third-Century Crisis

- Internal strain + external threats:
  - **Sasanian Iran** expanded westwards.
  - **Germanic tribes** (Alamanni, Franks, Goths) invaded the Rhine & Danube borders.
- Rapid succession: **25 emperors in 47 years**.

## 4. Society, Gender & Literacy

- **Family:** nuclear family common; slaves part of household.
- **Marriage:** women kept rights & property from their natal family.
- **Women:** had legal independence but often under husband’s influence.
- **Divorce:** simple, allowed by either partner.
- **Fathers’ authority:** could even abandon infants.
- **Literacy:** widespread casual literacy (e.g., Pompeii graffiti); scribes common in Egypt.
- **Languages:**
  - Aramaic (Near East), Coptic (Egypt), Punic/Berber (North Africa), Celtic (Spain).
  - Latin replaced some languages (e.g., Celtic stopped being written).

## 5. Economy & Expansion

- Strong infrastructure: harbors, mines, olive oil factories, quarries, brickyards.
- **Main products:** wheat, wine, olive oil.
- **Regions:**
  - Spain, North Africa, Egypt, Italy = big suppliers.
  - North Africa dominated olive oil in the 3rd–4th centuries.
  - Aegean, Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine later became exporters.
- Prosperous areas: Campania, Sicily, Egypt's Fayum, southern Gaul, Spain (Baetica).
- Economy used: water power, mining, banking, money system.

## 6. Labor & Workers

- **Slavery:** key in economy, but gradually declined due to fewer war captives.
- Slaves = expensive to maintain → wage labor became more common.
- **Free labor:** used in public works.
- **Slaves & freedmen:** often managers/business runners.
- Harsh conditions: chained gangs, strict supervision, factory/workshop controls.
- **Debt bondage** common among poor families.
- By the 6th century → wage labor was more widespread.

## 7. Social Hierarchies

- Structure (Tacitus):
  1. Senators
  2. Equestrians (rich horse-owning class)
  3. Respectable citizens
  4. Plebs sordida (poor lower class)
  5. Slaves
- Early empire: half senators = Italian; Late empire: many from Africa & East.
- Aristocracy = wealthy, but military elites (from non-aristocrats) gained more power.
- **Middle class:** officials, merchants, prosperous farmers.
- **Lower classes:** rural workers, miners, casual laborers, slaves.
- The economy shifted → **silver** → **gold currency** (after Spanish mines were exhausted).
- Bureaucracy rich but corrupt; Roman law checked emperors' power.

## 8. Late Antiquity (4th–7th centuries)

- **Emperor Constantine:**
  - Made Christianity official religion.
  - Introduced solidus (gold coin, long-lasting).
  - Founded **Constantinople** as the new capital.
- Religion: polytheism + Christianity coexisted (especially West).
- **East:** remained rich & populous.
- **West:** weakened by Germanic invasions → split into post-Roman kingdoms.
- **Justinian's reign:** strong in East but challenged by Iran & Arab invasions.
- **7th century:** Rise of Islam → Arabs took major territories from Rome & Persia.