

Chapter 10: Rome: From City-State to Empire: 10-1 Roman Foundations

Book Title: World Civilizations

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10-1 Roman Foundations

Rome is situated about halfway down the western coast of the Italian Peninsula, where one of the country's few sizable rivers, the Tiber, flows through fertile plains before emptying into the sea ([Map 10.1](#)).

Map 10.1

Ancient Italy

The Italian Peninsula was invaded innumerable times throughout history. The native Italic peoples of the north and center were taken over by the more civilized Etruscans in the tenth to eighth centuries B.C.E. Rome was probably founded by the unification of several villages under a single government in the eighth century, as Roman legend states.

Thinking About This Map

How did being a peninsula affect Italy's ancient history?



Very early Italy and the Italians are even more of a mystery than Greece and the Greeks. We do know that Indo-European peoples settled central and southern Italy at least as early as 1500 B.C.E. They developed farming villages but lagged seriously behind the peoples of the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East.

Around 800 B.C.E., three peoples from the East began to enter Italy, first as colonists and then as rulers of various segments of the Peninsula: the Etruscans (ee-TRUHS-cans), the Greeks, and the Phoenicians. Each of these civilized groups contributed substantially to Italian development, and the first two had a decisive effect on Roman civilization's early forms.

The **Etruscans** ((ee-TRUHS-cans) [The pre-Roman rulers of most of northern and central Italy and the cultural model for early Roman civilization.](#)), already highly advanced, came into Italy about 800, probably by following a route along the northern Adriatic Sea. They established a series of small city-states in the northern and central areas of the peninsula, ruling over the native Italic people by virtue of their superior weaponry and organization. They left a small amount of writing, but it has never been deciphered, so we have no historical record in the strict sense. We do know that a federation headed by Etruscan kings ruled over early Rome from about 750 to about 509 B.C.E. The pictorial record left by the Etruscans, mainly in recently rediscovered underground tombs, makes it clear that the early

Romans derived much of their religious beliefs, art forms, and architecture from these peoples.

According to Roman sources that may be unreliable, the Romans eventually rebelled against the idea of monarchy and were able to defeat the Etruscans because the pleasure-loving Etruscans could not stand up to the rigors of war as long as their rivals. After the Roman victory, the Etruscans gradually faded from history, absorbed by their former subjects.

In the long run, the Greeks had even more influence on Roman attitudes and manners than did the Etruscans. Whereas the Romans viewed the latter as rivals and defeated enemies, they regarded the Greeks as the one alien group that was superior to them in some ways. The early Romans were impressed by the advanced culture of the Greek migrants who had settled in southern Italy during the 700s. Overcrowding had caused these Greek colonists to leave their homes in Corinth, Thebes, and other Greek cities and to settle in foreign places. They soon transformed southern Italy into a prosperous and commercially advanced civilization but found that they had to fight both the Etruscans and the Phoenicians to hold on to it. True to Greek tradition, they made the job much harder by fighting among themselves.

Phoenician influence on Italian events came through [Carthage \(Rival in the Mediterranean basin to Rome in the last centuries B.C.E. before its ultimate defeat.\)](#). This great trading city had become independent of its homeland, Phoenicia, by 700 B.C.E. During this epoch, Carthage was the most powerful force in the western Mediterranean, sending ships as far away as Britain and the North Sea, as well as up the Nile River, and founding colonies of its own all over the coasts of Spain and France. The Carthaginians fought the Greek cities of southern Italy and Sicily to a draw until the Romans were able to take advantage of their mutual exhaustion to conquer both groups.

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