

Chapter 10: Rome: From City-State to Empire: 10-5a Law  
Book Title: World Civilizations  
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## 10-5a Law

An indisputably great Roman achievement was the development of a system of law with the flexibility to meet the needs of subject peoples as diverse as the Britons and the Syrians. This law system and a government that combined effective central controls with wide local autonomy are perhaps the most valued Roman gifts to later civilized society. Many types of law originally existed within the borders of the empire, but these gradually gave way to the system that the Romans had hammered out by trial and error during the republic and that continued to be developed in the empire. The basic principles of this legal system were (1) the notion of *precedent* as coequal to the letter of the law, (2) the belief that *equity* (fairness) was the goal of all law, and (3) the importance of *interpretation* in applying the law to individual cases.

The Romans had various codes of law. One originally applied only to citizens, and another applied only to aliens and travelers on Roman territory. During the early empire, the law code that governed relations between citizens and non-Romans, known as the [ius gentium](#) ((YOOS GEHN-tee-yum) “Law of peoples”; Roman law governing relations between Romans and others.) (yoos GEHN-tee-uhm; “law of peoples”), gradually came to be accepted as basic. The rights of citizens and noncitizens, of natives and aliens, came to be seen as worthy of protection by the Roman authorities. These rights were not equal, but they were recognized as existing. This concept paved the way for what we call “international law,” and it gradually took Roman justice far beyond the usual concepts of “us against you” that other ancient peoples normally employed with foreigners.

Later, in the third and fourth centuries, the Romans evolved *natural law*, the idea that all humans—by virtue of their humanity—possess certain rights and duties that all courts must recognize. As the Romans adopted Christianity, this natural law came to be viewed as the product of a God-ordained order that had been put into the world with the creation of Adam.

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