

EPISODE 14

SOMETIME AROUND THE YEAR ZERO

PART TWO

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is episode number fourteen of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Last time we talked about Greece. Today we're going to talk about Rome. Which virtually everyone agrees was the second major tributary which blended together with Greek culture to form the foundation of Western Civilization. And, as with Greece, my job today is to try to correct a lot of the misconceptions which our popular history has been telling us our whole lives.

Although this time I'm not going to be blaming 19th Century liberal historians. No, instead I'm going to be blaming our popular culture itself. You know, all those gladiator movies. And soap operas about depraved Roman emperors. And all those Bible stories about Roman tyranny and Roman cruelty.

Now did many or most of those people and events depicted in that popular entertainment really happen? Sure they did. There were depraved emperors. Gladiator combat did happen. The Romans were ruling Judea around the time of Christ. But in the present day we have car crashes. We have crooked cops. We have forest fires. But none of that says anything all that persuasive about our wider culture or civilization. And, quite simply put, if all Rome was about was crazy kings and bread and circuses, there's no way it could have existed in a continuing chain for some two thousand years.

Because that's right. It was about two thousand years between the start of the Roman Republic around the year 500 BC and the fall of Byzantium in 1453. It's just not possible that it could have just coincidentally held together for all that time. After all, we in the U.S. have not even gotten to 250 years. And how is our system holding up these days?

Anyway, let's briefly go over some of the historical cliches about the Romans. They were great soldiers. They were great engineers. They produced some great orators. But they were also basically militaristic thugs who ruled their downtrodden subjects through force and terror. They loved brutality. Their ruling elites were constantly betraying and backstabbing each other. Their idea of culture was a drunken orgy. And moral rot was a constant in their empire, and eventually led to its downfall.

Okay, now the first three things were true. Their military training and discipline were excellent, and although they did lose a surprising number of their battles, they almost always ended up winning the larger war. They built not only those amazing and picturesque aqueducts, but at the Empire's height well over 100,000 miles of, for the times, excellent paved roads. Their educational system focused on creating minds which could clearly understand and argue both logic and the law.

But the rest of the cliché? Well, in order to give you a picture of what the real Rome was like, it's probably best to start with a brief history of the various Romes which manifested themselves during those two thousand years.

So, beginning at the beginning: In 509 BC the citizens of what was then the very small city-state of Rome expelled their king and then instituted a government of interlapping representative assemblies. Thus the Roman Republic was born. And for the next three hundred years said republic ever so slowly expanded. This was more by circumstance than by active design, with this thing leading to that thing leading to numerous small wars that the Romans inevitably won. And I won't numb your mind with all of the endless wars and battles, but by around 200 BC Roman rule covered most all of present day Italy. Then the Republic got involved in the incessant wars between all of those Greek kingdoms which had arisen after the death of Alexander the Great. And a hundred years later, around 100 BC, it found itself in control of most of the Eastern Mediterranean. Throw in North Africa and Spain, and now all of a sudden you had an Empire.

Now this created somewhat of a problem. Because I won't numb your mind by going into all of the ins and outs of Roman republican government, what with the magistrates and the questors and the censors, and the senators. But what you need to know is that while Rome stayed relatively small, the system worked pretty effectively. And although conflict and tension always existed between the wealthy, the not so wealthy, and the not very wealthy at all, still there were mechanisms available for reform, and all in all it was a fairly good representation of representative government.

What's more, it was a cohesive society, with strongly observed social norms. The virtuous and honorable life was highly respected. And enough social and political mobility existed that there was, so to speak, breathing room for all.

By 100 BC all of that had radically decayed. First of all, all of those military victories meant that Rome had been deluged with huge numbers of new slaves. Which lowered the wages of everyone else. Next, the Senate had become pretty much the only important political institution, and most senators were now hereditary and ingrown. Bribery had become commonplace, and high offices were

routinely sold. Those tight social norms had pretty much evaporated, and although politicians still went on and on about old fashioned patriotism and Roman family values, everyone knew that it was a farce. Basically the Republic itself had become a joke, paralyzed by inaction, unable either to function or to reform. Whereas meanwhile everyone in authority kept talking about Representative virtue and kept pretending that the System was still alive and well.

Does any of this sound familiar?

Anyway, things kept deteriorating. In fact, if you were going to choose when relative moral decay was at its greatest, it would probably be at around this time. But Rome didn't fall. Instead around 50 BC Julius Caesar came upon the scene.

Now Caesar is usually presented as a power mad general hell bent on destroying the well ordered Republic and creating a dictatorship. But the reality is that instead he was this really competent person who, having looked around, clearly saw the reality that the System itself had fallen apart. And (probably accurately) he saw himself as the only person available who could hold it together.

Of course, his plans were dashed when he was assassinated in 44 BC. And in the ensuing chaos his appointed successor, Octavian, became the first certified Roman Emperor. Now another chapter began.

Octavian's reign was long and peaceful. But then came Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero, the real life templates of the debauched, depraved, perverted Roman Emperor. The problem with this narrative, though, is that most historians nowadays think that, first, Tiberius and Claudius were actually competent and sane. And that although Caligula and Nero were definitely really bad and crazy dudes, there is some question as to whether they were quite as deranged and perverted as they have been portrayed. After all, writers also embellished back then. And some of the lurid tales that had been passed down to them were just too juicy to drop.

But even if all of those stories were true and then some, this had absolutely nothing to do with Rome's decline four centuries later. Because, after one intense year of one general seizing power, only to be killed a few months later by another general seizing power, the role of emperor stabilized again. And the next hundred years or so included the so-called Five Good Emperors, most notably Marcus Aurelius, who also happened to be a serious Stoic philosopher.

In fact, the entire period of time from 27 BC to 180 AD, even with Caligula and Nero thrown in, is famously known as the Pax Romana. During that time a person could walk from the border of

Scotland to the coast of Portugal, and then eastwards all the way to Armenia, and on a paved Roman road no less, and not have the slightest concern for his personal safety. And at its height the Roman Empire successfully and peacefully ruled upwards of seventy million people who all lived within that great expanse. Which is even more impressive when you consider that they only had 2nd Century technology to do this with.

So what was their secret? Well, for one thing the reality is that by no means were Romans the capricious tyrants as portrayed in those gladiator and Bible movies. All that education in discourse and the law meant that, no matter the Emperor, the Empire itself always had a skilled and relatively honest civil service to administer a clear and complete legal and regulatory system. And having a well oiled military certainly didn't hurt when it came to keeping law and order.

But what was most critical in making the Romans so masterful and prosperous was a unique and creative attitude towards empire. Which would have been rare at any time, but which was especially remarkable for back then.

This had to do with how Rome treated all of the new peoples, cultures, and territories it absorbed into its empire. Now the traditional approach in the ancient world would have been to kill off all the newly conquered elites, install a whole superstructure of Roman overlords, and to replace all the local customs and laws with new directives from the central office.

But Romans had never set out to rule the world. Mainly due to circumstance, they just happened to find themselves in that position. So they had no psychological need to force others to think or act like them. What's more they were smart. They knew how much time and effort to took to force others to think or act like them.

So here's what they did. They would bring in the existing leading citizens of whatever new province or sub-province it was and offer them Roman citizenship. And all that involved was pledging allegiance to the Emperor, making token annual sacrifices to the gods, and a few other easy to perform obligations. If they agreed, they were then free to keep their former positions, power, and wealth, and to continue to run the place as it had been run before, customs, traditions, religion and all. In most cases Roman law would only be called in when local law couldn't solve the problem.

(By the way, this is why in the Bible Jesus was first tried before a Jewish court. And why it was only after the Jewish court couldn't come to a decision that he was taken to the Roman, Pontius Pilate.)

(Oh, and while we're kind of on that subject, the Romans didn't take the annual sacrifice to the gods to be anything more than a civil duty. Kind of like our pledge allegiance to the flag. And just like

very few of us in the modern world are actually making a real, deeply felt solemn pledge when we are doing that, so, too, the Romans really couldn't have cared less if you actually believed in their gods or not.)

Anyway, so against the cliché of Romans being cruel bloodthirsty tyrants who ruled by fear, the reality was pretty much just the opposite. Especially for the ancient world, Roman rule was remarkably generous and tolerant. Yes, there was a lot more torture and capital punishment, etc., than there is today. But compared to virtually any other place back then it wasn't bad at all. What's more, justice tended to be both just and predictable. So it's no wonder that, when offered the deal, conquered elites happily took it. Not only that, but the yoke was so light that sometimes alien states would approach Rome and ask to be ruled by it.

Which leads us to the other brilliant part of Rome's strategy. Because the Romans knew what they were good at, and, more importantly, they knew what they were not good at. They were great at the hyper-masculine stuff, such as the fighting and the road building and the verbal sparring in the courts and in the Senate. But as I mentioned in the last episode, they were lousy at the philosophy and the poetry and the music and the sculpture. And there are obviously individual Roman exceptions to this, but in general all of those cultural pursuits were left to the Greeks.

And this hand's off approach really came in handy as regards another, perhaps even more important, aspect of running an empire. Because it turns out that the Romans were also really pretty bad at being businessmen. They had no interest in entrepreneuring, in manufacturing, in accounting, you name it. And supplying seventy million people in all corners of the empire with all the accoutrements of modern 2nd Century technology was no simple project. So they left all of that, too, to the Greeks and the descendents of the Phoenicians and anyone else who wanted to build a boat or start a pottery assembly line. All that the Romans asked for was a cut off the top.

A protection racket, perhaps. But, again, one that was fairly administered. And one that was quite necessary for the times.

And here is where they really lucked out. Because when circumstance led them to take over the Eastern Mediterranean they happened to come into possession of what was, except maybe for China, the most economically advanced area in the entire world. Now since our direct cultural and political roots come from Western Europe, and since Rome itself was in Italy, we tend to think that this was where all the action was. But the truth is that areas like France and England were about as relevant to the larger Roman economy as Montana and Idaho are to ours. The majority of the population, every

other major city outside of Rome, and the largest part of the economy, were all in the East.

Anyway, the point here is that all of this easily siphoned off wealth meant that even with total political chaos, and emperors bumping each other off every six months or so, the larger show kept on going.

Which is why, picking up our timeline again, when just that situation occurred during the century after 180 AD, once again Rome did not fall apart. Now for a time it looked like it very well could, what with wars, civil wars, plagues, and all around general social and political decay. But then around 280 a new emperor, Diocletian, helped pull everything back together again. And for the next hundred years Rome was relatively stable and prosperous.

But Diocletian was also the person who officially created multiple emperors to rule the Western and Eastern halves. This didn't last that long. By the year 323 Constantine had again become a sole emperor. But he also moved the capital to Constantinople (which is present day Istanbul). And now most of the political energy moved east to be with the economic energy, and the Rome based part started its long decline. This decline picked up around the year 380, and in 395 the Empire was officially split in half, never to be reunited.

Now I'm sure that you're aware of the part where successive invasions of barbarian hordes from across the Rhine and the Danube hastened the Fall of Rome. And they were certainly a helping factor. But what you may not know is that many of these so-called 'barbarians', such as the Goths and the Vandals, were actually quite Romanized and civilized. After all, having lived along the borders with Rome for several centuries, they couldn't help but to have been influenced by all the trade goods, not to mention the peaceful and prosperous settled life just across the river from them. So that many of them in effect were wannabe Romans.

And as the West declined it was only too happy to hire many of them as mercenary soldiers and the like. Which led to letting many of them into the Empire to settle relatively empty lands. Which led to many of them forming alliances with the various generals and factions which were endlessly jockeying for power. So that instead of real life uncouth barbarians raping and pillaging, most of these so-called invasions were really just the old story of General A versus General B versus General C, only this time with a German cast added.

No matter. Because said invasions weren't even a cause of the decline so much as they were a result of it. And it became a vicious circle. Because as the central government became less effective, interest in supporting the central government, or even caring whether it existed, became less and less.

For instance, around the year 400 there was still a vibrant Roman culture in southern England, with manor houses and mosaics on the floor and the walls. And letters from that time are filled with sentiments such as, 'Why should we have to pay taxes to support that useless Federal government?' And within about thirty years of that literacy and everything else remotely civilized in England came to an abrupt end. And wouldn't really appear again for another six hundred years.

The East, however, was a different story. Because to a large extent this part of the Empire, which we know of as the Byzantine Empire, never missed a beat. In fact, in the 6th Century its greatest emperor, Justinian, came within a battle of reuniting the whole thing. And this was while he was also rewriting the entire Roman legal code, building the giant Hagia Sophia cathedral, and dealing with the ancient world's worst outbreak of the Plague. And Byzantium's size and power would fluctuate over the centuries, but it was still a major player on the world stage almost up until its final defeat by the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

But for our purposes the East *is* a different story. Because, remember, this history lesson is about the roots of Western European culture. So... What conclusions can we draw from the fall of the Western Roman Empire? And, more broadly, what lessons can we learn both from that and from Roman Civilization in general?

Well, first of all, no one has ever decisively concluded just why Rome fell. In fact, one historian has come up with a list of 210 different theories for the collapse. After all, those letters from England give no hint that anyone was expecting an impending collapse. It seems that at the time people more or less assumed that Rome had been through these downturns before. And that sooner or later another Diocletian would come along and get everything on the right track again. And, as I just noted, in the 6th Century Justinian came extremely close to doing just that.

But he didn't. Which certainly gives some support to the theory that History is just a long string of dumb luck.

What's more, some historians reject the idea that Rome ever really fell in the first place. Yes, the Dark Ages were only too real for the places that we relate to most, namely England and northern France. But for all intents and purposes Germany and Scandinavia had never become civilized in the first place. And in Spain, southern France and Italy Roman culture did hold on to a certain extent. Which is why today they all speak the various Romance languages, which evolved from Latin.

What's more, the *idea* of Rome, of peace and of order and of the dream of *civilization*, continued on in the minds of every even semi-educated person. So that when Charlemagne briefly

pulled together a vast amount of northern Europe in the year 800, he called it the Holy Roman Empire.

Because, although the names and the dates are interesting and all, that is the real point of this episode: That, for all of its annoyances, Civilization is one of those things that you don't miss until it's gone. And that when it's gone is when you really, really miss it. Because then things get really messed up.

Now when we get to the 18th Century we'll take a look at Rousseau and his beliefs. But while Rousseau is often mischaracterized as wanting to ditch civilization and go back to dancing around with so-called 'noble savages', what he was really talking about was how civilizations tend to make people artificial, materialistic, and status conscious. And that is indeed something to watch out for.

But back at the time of Greece and Rome Civilization was seen as not only an unalloyed good, but also as undoubtedly mankind's greatest invention yet. In fact, it's hard to overemphasize this point. Which is why it's probably not that surprising that ancient citizens were willing to put up with all kinds of state control, harsh penal codes, etc., in order to maintain whatever level of civilization that they could keep together.

Therefore, far more than coming up with military or engineering innovations, the real genius of Rome lay in the centuries and centuries long indoctrination of its ruling classes in the necessity of maintaining their civilization. And they did this through the theory and practice of Civic Virtue.

Now one thing that you should understand about the Romans is that they weren't a particularly religious lot. As I've already mentioned, those sacrifices to the gods were seen as a civic duty, not as an expression of intense spirituality. Because although Roman cities were chock a block with temples to the various gods, and although the common people may have loved the smell of incense and the celebration of religious holidays, by and large the ruling classes were preoccupied with their more manly pursuits of war and road building and law and land holding. Once again, soft, squishy subjects like philosophy and religion, were left to the Greeks. In fact, for example, in 93 AD the Emperor Domitian actually banned all philosophers from the city of Rome.

(And here's a side note: Perhaps because they weren't all that religious themselves, the Romans had no need or desire to question or deny the religious beliefs of anyone else in their empire. What's more, back then it was thought perfectly acceptable for someone to believe in, and be a follower of, more than one religion at the same time. And this will come into play in our next episode.)

Back to Civic Virtue, though. Because this basically was Rome's religion. So... What exactly did it entail?

Well, it's important to understand that the word 'virtue' for the Roman had everything to do with one's conduct in the world of the greater society. With service to the Republic or, later, to the Empire. Thus being a great philosopher or an honest businessman or a good father, while personally praiseworthy, had nothing to do with Virtue, since those behaviors took place in the private sphere. Which is why nowadays we call the concept Civic Virtue. Anyway, Virtue was acquired both from active manly pursuits such as military bravery, but also from the more silent ones, such as prudence, self-discipline, justice, and honor. And the necessity for Virtue was drummed into boys as soon as it was possible to drum things into them. On the one hand, they learned from Day One that lack of Virtue would bring disgrace upon their family. And on the other, they learned that it was only through the accumulation of Virtue that one could have any kind of chance at a political career.

Most importantly, Virtue ended up becoming a virtue in itself. And most of the few original and deep thinkers which Rome did produce, such as Cicero, Plutarch, and Livy, were distinguished by their concentration on morality and virtue.

Which, by the way, might be another reason why Romans didn't care about writing poetry or philosophizing or running a business. After all, those are all personal endeavors with all too often the aim of personal fame or fortune. To a Roman, as it had been with the Greeks, all the personal stuff was meaningless unless it was also tied to the greater glory of the larger society.

Now you might say that instilling virtue in this way, by not only equating manliness with putting community goals ahead of your own, but by only granting glory and prestige to those who had accumulated a large enough quantity of Civic Virtue, wasn't real morality. Rather that it was just a trick to get people to act unselfishly. But if it was a trick, well, then, the trick worked. For two thousand years. Because even during those periods of relative moral decay there were enough Roman families who believed sufficiently in Civic Virtue that the wheels of the system kept turning. And that it was only when the critical mass of selfishness reached a certain point that everything fell apart.

But until that point, forget about the good or bad emperors. Forget even about the outward form of government. What really kept Civilization going was a never ending ongoing focus on commitment to that higher ideal of Civilization. To putting the ideal of Other before the ideal of Self.

That being said, though, it turns out that Civic Virtue in and of itself wasn't enough. You also needed to have lots and lots of rules.

Now in today's postmodern world following rules is about as popular as is the need for Civilization. In fact, the dominant theme in today's advertising is along the lines of: 'You're the guy

who breaks all the rules. Nobody tells *you* what to do. That's why you buy whatever it is that we're selling!

But any baseball or football fan can tell you that the rules are there to facilitate the game. And that you know that the rules are right when the resulting game is both fair and interesting. And two thousand years ago, when the Civilization game was first being worked out, the Romans undertook the one great intellectual enterprise that they didn't leave to the Greeks. Namely, they strenuously applied the clarity of Greek logic, not to philosophy, but rather to the intricate task of creating a coherent and comprehensive legal system for those seventy million people who they were ruling.

And they were so good at doing that that today much of the world, from Western Europe to Latin America, still relies on a superstructure of Roman Law. And this is why even Common Law countries, such as England and all of its former colonies, not to mention the United States, is replete with term after legal term still in its original Latin.

So to sum up: Although Rome never started out to rule an Empire, once it did so, then its idealization of military valor as part of Virtue meant that new generations always had to go out and win more battles so as to expand said Empire. Further, the institution of Civic Virtue meant that the only truly noble way that one could distinguish oneself outside of battle was through serving the State. Finally, the main way that you served the State was by administering the State. Which meant becoming expert in, and furthering, the Law.

And *that*, in short, is the true story, not to mention the real lesson, of Rome. Not chariot races and drunken orgies. Instead the sober, steady Rule of Law. Two thousand years before apologists for liberal democracies pretended that they had come up with the idea.

And were there any miscarriages of justice back then? Of course there were. Just like there are miscarriages of justice today. But the *idea* of Justice... That's what held the whole thing together for all of those centuries.

Okay. Two down and one to go. But the third major influence on Western Civilization is perhaps the most important. And it's also the most interesting. And in certain ways perhaps the weirdest. But the reality of where it came from and what it involved is probably somewhat different from what you think it is.

Anyway, though, that's for next time. In the meantime, thanks again for once more so far having listened.