

CUET · HISTORY · CLASS XI · CODE 314

An Empire Across Three Continents

CUET unit: World History — Background

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Snapshot

- The Roman Empire (c. 27 BCE–7th century CE) was a Mediterranean-centred polity spanning Europe, North Africa and the Fertile Crescent, with Iran as its only rival superpower.
- The three "main players" of imperial politics were the emperor, the aristocracy (Senate) and the paid professional army. Imperial history divides into the "early empire" (down to c. 3rd century) and the "late empire" (Diocletian onward).
- Roman historians use three source types: texts (annals, letters, sermons), documents (inscriptions and papyri) and material remains (coins, amphorae, buildings).
- Key themes are urbanisation, the third-century crisis, gender-literacy-culture, the slave economy, social hierarchies, and Late Antiquity — culminating in Christianisation and the Arab conquests of the 630s.
- High-yield for CUET because it concentrates names, dates, institutions, denominations (denarius, solidus), social categories (equites, humiliores) and turning-point events that translate easily into factual and assertion-reason MCQs.

Detailed Notes

2.1 Core concepts

- The Roman Empire and the Iranian (Parthian-Sasanian) empire were the two superpowers ruling most of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East between the birth of Christ and the 630s, separated only by a narrow strip along the river Euphrates (NCERT Introduction, p. 39).
- The Mediterranean was the heart of Rome's empire; its boundaries were the Rhine and Danube to the north and the Sahara to the south, with the empire stretching at its 2nd-century peak from Scotland to the borders of Armenia and from the Sahara to the Euphrates (NCERT §The Early Empire, pp. 39–42).
- Iran was culturally homogeneous (largely Iranian population) while Rome was a "mosaic of territories and cultures" held together by a common system of government; Latin dominated the west, Greek the east, with the boundary running through the middle of the Mediterranean between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica (NCERT §The Early Empire, p. 40).

- The regime founded by Augustus in 27 BCE was called the "Principate" — Augustus styled himself merely Princeps (leading citizen) out of respect for the Senate; the Republic (509 BCE–27 BCE) had been overthrown by Octavian, Julius Caesar's adopted heir who later took the name Augustus (NCERT §The Early Empire + sidebar, p. 40).
- Three key institutions of imperial rule: the emperor, the Senate (aristocracy) and the army; unlike Iran's conscripted force, Rome's army was a paid professional one with a minimum 25-year service, numbering 600,000 by the fourth century and prone to mutinies (NCERT §The Early Empire, pp. 40–41).
- Succession was based on family descent — natural or adoptive (e.g., Augustus adopted Tiberius, 14–37 CE, to ensure smooth transition); 69 CE was a notorious year with four emperors in quick succession (NCERT §The Early Empire, p. 41).
- Roman expansion in the early empire was rare — Trajan's brief conquest across the Euphrates (113–17 CE) was abandoned by his successors; instead, Rome absorbed "dependent" client kingdoms into provincial territory (Herod's kingdom yielded 5.4 million denarii per year) (NCERT §The Early Empire, p. 42).
- Urbanisation was the answer to administering 60 million people — Carthage, Alexandria and Antioch were the great Mediterranean centres; local upper classes collaborated to raise taxes, and provincial elites later supplied governors and army commanders; Gallienus (253–68) excluded senators from military command (NCERT §The Early Empire, pp. 42–43).
- A Roman city had its own magistrates, council and a "territory" of villages; city-dwellers had food-security advantages over the countryside (Galen's account of grain hoarding during famines) (NCERT §The Early Empire, p. 43).
- Public baths and spectacula were distinctive — one calendar lists shows on 176 days of the year (NCERT §The Early Empire, p. 43).
- The third-century crisis (from the 230s) saw simultaneous wars on multiple fronts: the new Sasanian dynasty (founded 225) — Shapur I in a trilingual rock inscription claimed annihilating 60,000 Romans and capturing Antioch; Germanic confederacies (Alamanni, Franks, Goths) attacked the Rhine-Danube frontiers; 25 emperors in 47 years (NCERT §The Third-Century Crisis, p. 44).
- Roman family was typically nuclear; by the late Republic, marriage left the wife in her natal family's property (she remained primary heir, was an independent property owner on the father's death); divorce required only notice of intent; but women married in late teens/early twenties to men in late twenties/thirties, creating inequality; Augustine's mother was regularly beaten by his father (NCERT §Gender, Literacy, Culture, pp. 44–45).
- Fathers had legal power of life and death over children, including "exposing" unwanted babies; literacy was widespread in Pompeii (graffiti, wall-advertisements, buried in the 79 CE Vesuvius eruption) but mostly professional-scribe-mediated in Egypt (NCERT §Gender, Literacy, Culture, p. 45).

- Languages spoken alongside Latin/Greek: Aramaic (Near East), Coptic (Egypt), Punic and Berber (North Africa), Celtic (Spain and northwest); Armenian was first written in the 5th century; Coptic had a Bible translation by the mid-third century; Celtic ceased to be written after the 1st century (NCERT §Gender, Literacy, Culture, pp. 45–46).
- Economic infrastructure included harbours, mines, quarries, brickyards and olive-oil factories; wheat, wine and olive oil dominated trade; Monte Testaccio in Rome holds remains of over 50 million amphorae; Spanish olive oil in container "Dressel 20" peaked in 140–160 CE, followed by North African dominance (3rd–4th centuries), then East Mediterranean (Aegean, Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine) after 425 (NCERT §Economic Expansion, pp. 46–47).
- Fertile/wealthy regions: Campania (best wine), Sicily and Byzacium (wheat to Rome), Galilee, Fayum (Egypt), Gallia Narbonensis, Baetica (Spanish olive-oil estates along the Guadalquivir). Numidia practised transhumance — semi-nomadic mapalia-dwellers; Spanish north had Celtic-speaking hilltop villages (castella) (NCERT §Economic Expansion, p. 47).
- Roman economy was sophisticated — diversified water-power, hydraulic mining in Spanish gold/silver mines (output levels not reached again till the 19th century), commercial/banking networks and widespread money use (NCERT §Economic Expansion, p. 47).
- Slavery — under Augustus, Italy had 3 million slaves in a total population of 7.5 million; this proportion did not hold empire-wide; Christianity, when it triumphed in the 4th century, did not seriously challenge slavery; with peace after the 1st century, slave supply declined and wage labour/slave breeding rose (NCERT §Controlling Workers, p. 48).
- Labour control techniques: Columella recommended squads of ten; Pliny the Elder condemned slave-gangs as the worst method; the Elder Pliny described Alexandria's frankincense factory (workers sealed in aprons, masked, stripped before leaving); a 398 CE law branded runaway workers; debt contracts trapped free workers in bondage (NCERT §Controlling Workers, pp. 48–50).
- Tacitus's hierarchy: senators (patres), equestrian class (equites — "knights", shipowners/traders/bankers), respectable middle class, plebs sordida ("unkempt lower class") and slaves; by Constantine's reign senators and equites had merged into a unified aristocracy; below were the humiliores (rural labour, miners, migrant harvesters, artisans, casual labourers, slaves) (NCERT §Social Hierarchies, pp. 50–51).
- The "late Roman" aristocracy in Rome city drew up to 4,000 lbs of gold a year per household (Olympiodorus); the late-empire monetary system shifted from silver (Spanish silver mines exhausted) to Constantine's solidus, a 4½ gm pure-gold coin (NCERT §Social Hierarchies + Late Antiquity, p. 51).

- Diocletian (284–305) cut back territory, fortified frontiers, reorganised provinces (into 100 in 297), separated civilian from military functions and empowered military commanders (duces); Constantine added the solidus and founded the second capital at Constantinople (formerly Byzantium) on the site of modern Istanbul (NCERT §Late Antiquity, pp. 51–52).
- Christianisation was gradual — pre-Christian religion was polytheist (Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Mars + many Greek/eastern deities); Judaism was diverse; in the West, bishops fought polytheism in the 4th–5th centuries; the East was prosperous through the 6th century despite the 540s plague (NCERT §Late Antiquity, pp. 52–53).
- Western empire fragmented as Germanic groups set up "post-Roman" kingdoms: Visigoths in Spain (destroyed by Arabs 711–720), Franks in Gaul (c. 511–687), Lombards in Italy (568–774); in the East, Justinian recaptured Africa from the Vandals (533) and Italy from the Ostrogoths (NCERT §Late Antiquity, pp. 53–54).
- The 7th-century Arab expansion — within ten years of Muhammad's death (by 642), large parts of both the eastern Roman and Sasanian empires had fallen; this was "the greatest political revolution ever to occur in the history of the ancient world" (NCERT §Late Antiquity, pp. 54–55).

2.2 Definitions to memorise

Term	Definition	Page
Principate	Regime established by Augustus in 27 BCE; the emperor was projected as "leading citizen" (Princeps), not absolute ruler, out of respect for the Senate.	40
Republic	The pre-imperial regime (509 BCE–27 BCE) where real power lay with the Senate, a body dominated by wealthy "noble" families.	40
Senate	Aristocratic body representing the wealthiest landowning families of Roman and Italian descent; membership for life; wealth and office-holding mattered more than birth.	40
Conscripted army	A forcibly recruited army where military service is compulsory for certain groups — used by Persians; contrasted with Rome's paid professional army.	40
Civil war	Armed struggle for power within the same country (vs. wars between different countries).	41
Client kingdoms	Local kingdoms that depended on Rome — their rulers backed Rome militarily and were allowed to exist in return.	42

Term	Definition	Page
Denarius	Roman silver coin containing about 4½ gm of pure silver.	42
Near East	From the perspective of a Mediterranean Roman, the territory east of the Mediterranean — Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia and (loosely) surrounding areas like Arabia.	42
Casual literacy	The use of reading and writing in everyday, often trivial, contexts (e.g., Pompeii graffiti).	45
Transhumance	The herdsman's regular annual movement between higher mountain regions and low-lying ground in search of pasture.	47
Mapalia	Oven-shaped huts carried by the semi-nomadic communities of Numidia.	47
Castella	Hilltop villages of the Celtic-speaking peasantry in northern Spain.	47
Slave breeding	The practice of encouraging female slaves and their partners to have more children, who would also be slaves — used as the slave-supply declined.	48
Draconian	Harsh; from the early sixth-century BCE Greek lawmaker Draco who prescribed death for most crimes.	49
Equites	"Knights" or "horsemen" — the second most powerful and wealthy class; originally cavalry families; many were shipowners, traders and bankers.	50
Humiliores	"Lower" — the vast mass of lower classes including rural labour, mine workers, migrant harvesters, artisans, casual labourers and slaves.	50
Solidus	New gold coin of 4½ gm of pure gold introduced by Constantine; outlasted the Roman Empire.	52
Monolith	Literally a large block of stone; figuratively, anything lacking variety (used to say Judaism was NOT a monolith).	53
Christianisation	The gradual process by which Christianity spread among different population groups and became the dominant religion.	53
Laity	Ordinary members of a religious community (as opposed to clergy/priests).	53
Annals		38

Term	Definition	Page
	Histories constructed on a year-by-year narrative basis — a main category of Roman textual sources.	
Papyrus	Reed-like plant from the Nile, processed to produce a writing material widely used for contracts, accounts, letters and documents; studied by "papyrologists".	38
Barbarian	Romans' label (from Greek barbaros) for outsider tribes (Germanic, Gauls, Huns); a stereotype implying childlike, cruel, slothful and politically incompetent peoples.	(carried over via Theme 3 sidebar, p. 59) but the Roman text uses it on p. 44

2.3 Diagrams / processes to remember

- Map 1: Europe and North Africa showing the Mediterranean as the heart of the empire, with Rhine/Danube as the northern boundary and the Sahara as the southern boundary (NCERT, p. 39).
- The "Shops in Forum Julium, Rome" image — piazza with columns built after 51 BCE to enlarge the older Roman Forum (NCERT, p. 41).
- Pont du Gard near Nimes, France (1st century BCE) — massive Roman aqueduct used to illustrate engineering across three continents (NCERT, p. 42).
- Amphitheatre at Vindonissa, Switzerland (1st century CE) — used for military drill and entertaining soldiers, illustrating urban entertainment (NCERT, p. 43).
- Shipwreck off the south coast of France (1st century BCE) — Italian amphorae stamped by a producer near the Lake of Fondi; illustrates how amphora finds reconstruct trade routes (NCERT, p. 46).
- "Dressel 20" container shape — the diagnostic Spanish olive-oil amphora, used to map distribution from the Guadalquivir estates across the Mediterranean (NCERT, p. 46).
- Mosaic at Cherchel, Algeria (early 3rd century CE) — agricultural scenes of ploughing/sowing and vineyard-work, illustrating slave-and-free labour on rural estates (NCERT, p. 48).
- Colossal statue head of Constantine, 313 CE, illustrating the new ruler who established Christianity and the solidus (NCERT, p. 52).
- The Colosseum (79 CE) — capacity 60,000, where gladiators fought wild beasts (NCERT, p. 53).
- Mosaic at Ravenna, 547 CE, depicting Justinian — visual for the Late Antiquity recovery of Africa and Italy (NCERT, p. 56).
- Timeline of rulers and events, 27 BCE to 711 CE (NCERT, p. 55).

- **Process — how an amphora "speaks" to a historian:** (1) amphora shape (e.g., Dressel 20) identifies the producing region; (2) clay fabric is matched to known kiln sites; (3) painted/stamped marks name the producer or estate; (4) the shipwreck or rubbish dump in which it was found dates the deposit; (5) total volume (e.g., Monte Testaccio's 50 million containers of Spanish oil) yields trade-volume estimates (NCERT §Economic Expansion, pp. 46–47).
- **Process — Diocletian's administrative restructuring (297 CE):** (1) re-drew provincial map into 100 provinces; (2) split civilian from military authority; (3) appointed duces as professional military commanders; (4) raised army pay and reformed the coinage; (5) created tetrarchy of four co-rulers to share burden (NCERT §Late Antiquity, pp. 51–52).

2.5 Timeline / Key events

Year / Period	Event	Significance
509 BCE	Roman Republic established	Senate-dominated rule begins (NCERT sidebar, p. 40)
27 BCE	Augustus founds the Principate	Birth of the Roman empire (NCERT p. 40)
14–37 CE	Reign of Tiberius (Augustus's adopted heir)	Smooth dynastic transition (NCERT p. 41)
66–70 CE	Jewish revolt and destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem	Major provincial upheaval (NCERT timeline, p. 55)
79 CE	Mount Vesuvius erupts, burying Pompeii and Herculaneum	Preserves graffiti, wall-paintings — primary source for daily literacy (NCERT p. 45)
113–17 CE	Trajan briefly conquers across the Euphrates	Last sustained Roman expansion (NCERT p. 42)
c. 140–160 CE	Spanish olive-oil exports in Dressel-20 amphorae peak	High-tide of Mediterranean trade (NCERT p. 46)
212 CE	Caracalla's edict grants universal Roman citizenship	Provincial elites mainstreamed (NCERT timeline, p. 55)
224–25 CE	Ardashir I founds the Sasanian dynasty in Iran	Renewed eastern threat (NCERT p. 44)
230s–280s CE	Third-century crisis — 25 emperors in 47 years	Worst political instability of the empire (NCERT p. 44)
250s CE	Shapur I defeats Romans; trilingual inscription claims 60,000 Romans killed and Antioch captured	Sasanian high-point (NCERT p. 44)

Year / Period	Event	Significance
253–68 CE	Gallienus excludes senators from military command	Rise of provincial-army elite (NCERT p. 43)
284–305 CE	Diocletian — 100 provinces, civilian/military split	Late-empire reorganisation (NCERT p. 51)
312 CE	Constantine converts to Christianity	Begins Christianisation of empire (NCERT p. 52)
c. 310 CE	Constantine introduces the gold solidus (4½ gm)	New monetary standard for late empire (NCERT p. 52)
378 CE	Roman defeat at Adrianople by Goths	Frontier collapse in the Balkans (NCERT p. 55)
410 CE	Visigoths sack Rome	Symbolic end of Roman invulnerability (NCERT p. 55)
428 CE	Vandals capture Africa	West loses its richest grain province (NCERT p. 55)
533–50 CE	Justinian's reconquest of Africa and Italy	Last Roman recovery (NCERT p. 55)
541–70 CE	Bubonic plague outbreaks across the Mediterranean	Demographic collapse (NCERT p. 53)
622 CE	Hijra of Prophet Muhammad — Year 1 of the Islamic calendar	Beginning of the Islamic era (NCERT p. 55)
633–42 CE	Arab conquests overrun Sasanian Iran and Roman Near East / Egypt	"Greatest political revolution of the ancient world" (NCERT p. 54)
711 CE	Arab invasion of Spain, ending the Visigothic kingdom	End of post-Roman West (NCERT p. 55)

2.4 Common confusions / NTA trap points

- "Principate" vs. "Republic" vs. "Empire" — Augustus founded the Principate in 27 BCE; the Republic was 509–27 BCE. Students often confuse the date or attribute the Principate to Julius Caesar (it was his adopted heir Octavian/Augustus).
- The Roman army was paid and professional (25-year minimum service); the Iranian/Persian army was conscripted. NTA often swaps these.
- Denarius (silver, 4½ gm) vs. Solidus (gold, 4½ gm). Same weight, different metals, different periods (denarius = early empire; solidus = Constantine onwards).
- Tacitus's five categories — senators, equites, respectable middle class, plebs sordida, slaves — vs. the late-empire two-tier honestiores/humiliores split. Distractors swap "equites" with "patres" or call senators "knights".

- Pompeii was buried by Vesuvius in 79 CE — students sometimes confuse this with 96 CE or with the eruption that killed the Elder Pliny (same eruption, 79 CE).
- Constantinople vs. Byzantium — Constantinople was founded at the site of older Byzantium; it became the second capital under Constantine, not Diocletian.
- "Late Antiquity" refers to the 4th to 7th centuries, not the 3rd century (which is the "third-century crisis").
- Sack of Rome by the Visigoths (410) is often confused with the Vandal capture of Africa (428) or with Alaric / Attila.
- Pliny the Elder (naturalist, killed at Vesuvius 79 CE) vs. Pliny the Younger (his nephew, the letter-writer who described the eruption) — both are and NTA loves to swap their roles.
- Gallienus (253–68 CE) "excluded senators from military command" — students confuse him with Diocletian or Constantine; both later reforms continued his trajectory but did not initiate it.
- "Equites" originally meant cavalry/knights, but by Tacitus's time it referred to shipowners, traders and bankers — not a military category.
- The 540s plague (NCERT p. 53) affected the **East** but the East still remained prosperous through the 6th century — students often assume the plague ended Eastern prosperity.

Practice MCQs

PYQ Alignment

This chapter is a steady source of 4–6 MCQs each year in CUET History (314), with NTA favouring date-event matching from the chronological table (27 BCE Principate, 79 CE Pompeii, 212 universal citizenship, 312 Constantine, 410 sack of Rome, 622 hijra), term-definition matching for denarius/solidus/equites/humiliores/Principate, and assertion-reason questions on urbanisation, the third-century crisis and the slave economy. Statement-based "Which of the following is correct?" items typically target the Roman vs. Iranian army contrast and the gradual nature of Christianisation in Late Antiquity. See full archive at </pyq/history>.