

Ultimus Romanorum:

A Discussion on Endings in Roman History

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Introduction

From the founding of Rome, over twenty-five hundred years ago, there has been an idea of what a Roman was. Wars have been fought on this very topic, generations of men looking back at history and claiming their supposed Romaness. Following the fall of the Roman Empire, which exact date and location can be debated, various people have been claimed to be the final Roman. These men can all be considered Roman in their own regard, be that ethnically Roman, the last to have that Roman spirit, or the final ruler of a political system that, with their death, ceased to exist. In the olden days, wielding the title of “King of Rome”, or a title that was equivalent, such as Consul, or Augustus, brought with it incredible prestige.¹ Looking back at Roman historical figures, we may think it is rather silly—these men of old trying to establish themselves as Roman, whatever that meant—the prestige truly meant something to these people. Understanding the importance of their Roman values and essence gives us great insight into the thoughts these people had when ruling their kingdoms or governing their empires. It’s easy to look back and see these historical figures as characters, people playing their roles as an actor would upon their stage. But it’s important to remember that these people were human with complex beliefs and thoughts. As they attempted to understand the political world they lived in, we look back in retrospect and try to understand their motives and what gave rise to said motives. History is not just the study of battles or wars, movements and discoveries. It is also, primarily, the study of humanity in its purest form.

What does it mean to be the end of an era? For most, it is to be the last to represent an idea. From a Roman perspective, it means to be the last embodiment of Roman political power. Romans viewed these powerful individuals at the helm of a state as the literal incarnation of a state’s power. This paper will examine several historical figures who hold claim to the title of

“Last Roman”, the legitimacy of their claims, and the historical context of their lives. To be a Last Roman means to be the last leader of a Roman-style state, be it militarily, politically, or culturally. It can be argued that these historical figures are all the “Last Roman” because they represent the end of an era as well as the end of a version of Rome.

I. Lucius Tarquinius Superbus

Early Roman history is something shrouded in mystery, to an extent. Starting with the founding of Rome by Romulus and Remus, historical record blurs the line between history and legend. The short-lived Roman Kingdom was how the great civilization we know today began. The Romans, even in their early days, prided themselves on a new system of government, one that the world had only experimented here and there with.² This was the Roman Republic, but that state was born from the expulsion of the Roman Monarchy. To understand this though, we need to understand the final King of Rome: Lucius Tarquin Superbus, normally referred to as Tarquin. The seventh man to rule Rome, Tarquin would come to power by supposedly murdering both his wife and brother.³ These murders follow the assassination of his predecessor to the throne, Servius Tullius. Right away, Tarquin’s rise to the throne is in a haze of blood and familicide. Tarquin’s fatal flaw, perhaps, was his pride, something his historical name reflects: “superbus”, literally meaning proud or arrogant.⁴

Tarquin’s reign is equally as bloody as his rise to power itself. The Senate of the Roman Kingdom was more of an oligarchy than the Senate we think of today, which is elected by the people⁵. After Tarquin had sat upon the throne and felt the power of the Kingdom, it’s easy to say he went mad with it. One of his first acts was to order the death of the senators he believed loyal to Servius, continuing the trend of bloodshed that would mar his reign.⁶ While today, we

consider the Romans “Latin”, this isn’t entirely true, as early Rome was frequently at war with her Latin neighbors. The Latin Peoples included Romans, but also a wide range of tribes and other small kingdoms. While Tarquin was away on campaign with peoples we know as Rutuli, his son, Sextus Tarquinius, raped a noblewoman named Lucretia. We can place this event somewhere in the years 507 or 508 BCE. Following Sextus’s crime, Lucretia decides to take action, though what action she takes differs depending on the source you read. In ancient historian Livy’s account of these events, Lucretia calls for her father and husband, who each bring a witness. One of these men brought along is Lucius Junius Brutus—the forefather of Marcus Junius Brutus, who lived during the times of Caesar. After revealing what Sextus had done, Lucretia commits suicide by stabbing herself in the heart with a dagger. After learning this, the four men swear an oath of vengeance upon the Roman monarchs.⁷ Brutus would become the key figure in this coming revolution, going to both the Aristocracy and the Roman army, and gaining support from both. With the King already unpopular with his people due to his violent nature, Brutus now wielded all three sources of power in the Roman Kingdom. After a debate of what to do in the city of Rome itself, Brutus proceeded to where Tarquin was camped, at the siege of a city called Ardea. Tarquin had left his army once he heard of the goings-on in Rome, Brutus arrived the the Roman Army, who they hailed as their new leader. Tarquin had thought to make for Rome, but was instead cast away from the city he owned, fleeing into exile with his family.

Brutus, for his part in leading the revolution, would be one of Rome’s first Consuls, an elected position that lasted for a year. Brutus introduced what we now call “The Oath of Brutus”, declaring that no king should ever rule Rome again.⁸

While that seems like the end of Tarquin's story, it's not quite over yet. He still attempted to return to Rome, first via a coup or counter-conspiracy.⁴ After all, despite all of his failures, he still had supporters in Rome. After the discovery and destruction of the conspiracy, he would then attempt to retake Rome by force. In one of these battles, Tarquin would indirectly face Brutus, the man who overthrew him; Brutus would die in that same clash⁸. Even the death of one of the new Consuls was not enough. After losing a final war in which Tarquin fought alongside the Latin League against Rome, Tarquin fled to Cumae, where he would die in 495 BCE⁴, the final King of Rome, living in exile.

Tarquin is a Last Roman, decidedly. He was the final Roman Monarch, the Seventh King to rule the Roman Kingdom. His legacy is that of a tyrant, a corrupt head of state overthrown by his people. In popular culture, he is used as an example of tyrannical men, being mentioned during events such as the American Revolution and is alluded to in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

II. Gaius Julius Caesar

The Roman Republic lasted nearly 500 years.⁹ That fact is hard to wrap your mind around; for an example, America has yet to last for 250 years. It's a mind-boggling amount of time for one state to exist. However, as the Republic aged, it began to rot and decay. In 82 BCE, the Republic, which had sworn to never allow one man to have too much power again, was increasingly finding itself under dictatorial rule. The anti-king sentiment in Rome was mostly a reaction to the expulsion of Tarquin and the abolition of the Roman monarchy.¹⁰ Sulla, a Roman General, held immense power over Rome for an extended time, being functionally a military dictator. Sulla, however, is not the focus of this part. Sulla's reign came to an end in 78 BCE with his death as a private citizen. While Roman politics slowly began to return to normal, Sulla had

laid a dangerous precedent: Power, both as a Consul and Dictator, could be achieved by force.¹⁰ Continuing in that trend was Julius Caesar, a man who fundamentally reshaped the Roman political world. For our purposes, we're more concerned with Caesar's status as a Last Roman. To understand how he fits this criteria, it's important to understand his life and legacy.

Caesar's career begins with him fleeing Sulla's rule, fearing for his life.¹¹ At this time in Roman history, the Republic's holdings in Asia Minor and Syria were still new, and not permanent by any means. Caesar distinguished himself as a soldier and general here, leading to him being sent on a diplomatic mission to Bithniya, a Kingdom along the Black Sea. Having made a name for himself, and with the death of Sulla as well, Caesar deemed it safe to return to Rome and keep his career moving. His next major assignment was to go to Hispania, modern day Spain, and act formally as one of the province's governors, what the Romans may have called a proconsulship, or "propraetorship" depending on the source. Caesar again, would distinguish himself by ruling Hispania competently, even conquering tribes to expand the borders. His soldiers hailed him as "imperator", meaning Caesar had earned a Roman Triumph.¹² A "triumph" was a military parade of sorts and a great honor—the only time an active general or soldier could enter Rome's city limits legally¹³. However, Caesar wanted to declare himself candidate for that year's Consular elections. To do this, Caesar had to be in Rome—something he could not do if he was an active general.

In this way, the Roman Senate had forced Caesar's hand: either refuse the triumph, something anyone could hardly imagine ever doing, or not run for Consul this year. Here, it's important to note Caesar's politics. He was a reformer, a populist. His opponents in the Senate were the Conservative faction, who disliked Caesar for his populist tendencies.¹⁴ Caesar decided to forgo the triumph, which was considered the ultimate honor for a Roman general. Instead, he

gave up command, entered Rome as a private citizen, and declared himself to be in the running for the election of 59 BCE.¹⁵

Caesar's bold move to discard the triumph he had earned shocked both the Senate and people of Rome. Unsurprisingly, Caesar was elected to the office of Consul.¹⁵ To help his chances in the election, Caesar joined a pivotal group known as The Triumvirate. Caesar was a member of a secret political alliance between himself, Rome's richest man Marcus Crassus, and one of its greatest generals, Pompey Magnus.¹⁶ Together, these three men controlled Rome through various means. Caesar's consulship was dominated by land reform and passing whatever Pompey and Crassus wished for, so long as none of the other members of the Triumvirate rejected it.¹⁵ Caesar's consulship was not perfect, however: his conduct was less than graceful and he showed a lack of respect for the law and customs. It could be argued—and was argued by his peers—that some of Caesar's actions during his run as Consul were illegal and he should be punished.¹⁵ Here, another Roman concept is important: the concept of Legal Immunity, granted to one by controlling a position of power within the Republic. Governors, Consuls, and some Generals had legal immunity that would expire upon their term ending.¹⁷

Thankfully for Caesar, his immunity wasn't over yet, as he had been granted the provinces of Dalmatia, Cisalpine Gaul, and Transalpine Gaul to run once his Consulship had ended.¹⁵ These provinces correspond to modern-day Northern Italy, right along the Alps that functioned as a stable border between Rome and the lands known as Gaul, now modern-day France and Belgium. Caesar's position as governor of these key provinces allowed him to begin diplomatic interactions with the Gallic people on a scale the Roman world had never seen before, including his first ventures into Gaul on military campaigns.

Caesar claimed he was entering Gaul and subjecting tribes to stabilize the region, but to both the Gallic peoples and the Romans back home, it was obvious Caesar sought to conquer all of Gaul. Notably, Caesar was the first Roman to enter Britain, fighting a short campaign in 55 BCE.¹⁸ Throughout his governance of his provinces, Gallic resistance had mostly been scattered throughout Gaul, and individual tribes had been unable to resist the full might of Roman Legions. It is important to add Caesar was a skilled commander of troops, and they were now personally loyal to him. In 52 BCE, the Gauls finally united in a push to force Rome out of Gaul once and for all, under the leadership of Vercingetorix.¹⁹ The resulting few years were the peak of the Gallic Wars—all of Caesar's conquests were in danger of being lost, with almost all of Gaul uniting to push the Romans out. In the end, however, Caesar won out, defeating Vercingetorix at the Battle of Alesia.²⁰ After this victory, Gaul was now functionally a Roman province. The Gallic Wars were over, and Caesar had reached the apex of his career.

Upon returning to his provinces in Transalpine and Cisalpine Gaul, he was met with trouble almost right away. In 53 BCE, while Caesar was fighting in Gaul, Crassus—a member of the Triumvirate, the secret alliance that bound Caesar and Pompey—was killed in Parthia.²¹ With Crassus dead, Caesar and Pompey stood as the two most powerful men in Rome. As Caesar's time as governor wound down, he refused to give up command of his province and legions, fearing prosecution. When Caesar would lose his command, he would lose his legal immunity. Pompey, his former ally, had turned against him as well and joined the Senate in ordering Caesar to stand down. Instead, in 49 BCE, Caesar crossed the Rubicon River—a small and unimportant body of water that served as the boundary between Rome and its provinces. When Caesar and his legion crossed that border, a civil war began. Shortly after his crossing of the Rubicon River, Caesar was declared a enemy of Rome.¹⁷

Caesar's prospects were grim. He was outmanned; Pompey held Rome itself and had control of the Senate, and was considered by many to be the greatest general Rome had at the time. However, Caesar's legions were actually with him at the moment. Pompey's legions were in Hispania, and he had begun recruiting new legions in Greece. Pompey made the choice to give up the city of Rome itself, in favor of traveling to Greece and preparing his legions.²² First, Caesar marched west, towards the Spanish provinces. There, he would win his first victories of the Civil War. With Spain defeated to the West, Pompey remained in the East. By the time Caesar had defeated the Spanish Legions, Pompey had built a formidable army. Caesar went east, and battled Pompey at the Battle of Pharsalus. Against all odds, Caesar won out, defeating Pompey. Pompey fled to Egypt, and Caesar established control over Greece. The Pompeian faction now only controlled the province of Africa. In effect, the Civil War was over. Caesar had won. This victory was solidified when Pompey was put to death by the Pharaoh of Egypt, hoping to curry favor with Caesar. Caesar arrived in Egypt, having come looking for Pompey. Thus began his Egyptian expedition.²³

Caesar's expedition into Egypt resulted in a lot of things; however, the most important was his relationship with a woman contending for the Egyptian throne: Cleopatra. By the time Caesar was preparing to leave Egypt, she was already pregnant with a son to be named Caesarion.²⁴ After this, Caesar would begin the process of ending the Civil War officially. He fought in Africa, bringing the last province back into the Republic under his control. He fought a rebellion in Spain as well, led by none other than his former second in command, Labenius. The Battle of Munda, or the Munda Campaign is seen as the final act of the Civil War.²⁵ After all of this, Caesar was victorious. He'd won battles all across the Republic and outside it. At long last,

Caesar had found himself atop the Roman World, wielding unparalleled power. However, Caesar would not live to see his plans come to fruition.

Caesar received a cryptic warning from a seer named Spurinna. He was told to beware the Ides of March— a warning that harm would come to him in some way. Caesar didn't seem to take this too seriously. On the Ides, he had a Senate meeting anyway. Caesar attended the meeting in the Theater of Pompey. After entering, a cabal of Senators surrounded him. And then, all of a sudden, they were on him, striking him with daggers they had hidden in the theater.²⁶ The assassination was over in a flash—Brutus, a friend of Caesar, had stabbed him for the last time. His body came to rest under a statue of Pompey, his former ally-turned-enemy in the Civil War.²⁶

Caesar is an interesting case as a Last Roman. While not traditionally not seen as one, he represents the end of an era in a way, the ending of the Republic. While dictators weren't a new thing for the Republic, Caesar can be seen as both an ending and beginning. He's sometimes counted as the first Roman Emperor, though this isn't true. Caesar never held the level of power needed to be considered Emperor; the title of first Emperor goes to his grand-nephew, Octavian. Instead, Caesar can be seen as the last man to hold legitimate power in the Republic. After his death, Rome was divided between men loyal to him, and men who killed him, the Conspirators.²⁶ It's hard to tell what Caesar intended to do with his power— perhaps he did intend to destroy Roman political institutions and crown himself King of the Romans, or perhaps he did fully intend to relinquish power after a certain amount of time. One thing is for sure: Caesar's death is a demarcation line, where a brief interregnum occurs, and then the Empire is born, and the Republic is destroyed.

III. Marcus Junius Brutus

Born in 85 BCE, Brutus came from a long and historic line of famous men. Perhaps most famous was his ancestor Lucius Junius Brutus—one of the men who helped drive Tarquin, Last King of Rome, out and found the Republic.²⁷ It was no surprise, then, that Brutus found himself entering politics, as all his family had.²⁷ However, Brutus was coming of age in an uncertain time in the Republic's life. His own father was killed by Pompey Magnus,²⁷ one of Rome's most powerful men and ally-turned-enemy of Caesar. It must have been hard for Brutus to make peace with how his father died, as he would oppose Pompey for much of his life. Brutus, now a Senator, watched in horror alongside the rest of the Senate when a governor of the provinces above Italy marched across the Rubicon and began the Civil War. Brutus was forced to make a choice: join the man who had killed his father, or join a man actively attacking the Republic he loved so dearly. Important to note as well, Brutus's mother was one of Caesar's lovers, tying him to both Caesar and Pompey. He traveled east with Pompey and other Senators such as Cicero and Cato, preparing for the coming war. After Caesar crushed Pompey and his forces at Pharsalus, Brutus returned to Rome, not knowing what to expect from Caesar. Caesar, wanting to reconcile the Republic, welcomed Brutus back with open arms, even appointing him Governor of Cisalpine Gaul. According to Caesar, Brutus would also be made Consul in the coming years—the height of Roman power and prestige, besides the position Caesar held—that of dictator.²⁷ Despite these personal overtures to Brutus, he was disturbed by Caesar's increasing grip over the Roman world. Brutus was shocked when Caesar had the Senate declare him “Dictator Perpetuo”—literally, Dictator for Life.²⁸ Even after Caesar's attempts to sway Brutus to his side, the man still held his personal beliefs. In 44 BCE, Brutus was given word of a conspiracy going around: a conspiracy to kill Gaius Julius Caesar.

Though Brutus was conflicted between his personal loyalty to Caesar, and his Republican ideals, he did join the conspiracy to kill Caesar. In his mind, Caesar had let the power go to his head, and Caesar seemed ready to destroy Roman politics forever. On the Ides of March, 44 BCE, Brutus had a group of conspirators committed to their plot, and killed Caesar in the Theater of Pompey. The most powerful man in the Roman world was dead, and Brutus, now a leading figure of the movement to kill Caesar, seemed poised to restore the Republic just as his forefather, Lucius Junius Brutus, had when he drove out Tarquin.

None of that came to pass, however. Instead, Brutus and his fellow conspirators squandered their opportunities. After brokering a peace with the new Caesarian faction, Brutus went to the Republic's eastern provinces, where he and another conspirator, Cassius, began to raise Legions. Mark Antony and Octavian Caesar, two of the members of the Second Triumvirate, also began to raise an army. The third member of the Second Triumvirate, Lepidus, remained in the West to guard Rome.²⁹ In 42 BCE, Antony and Octavian went east, clashing with Brutus and Cassius at the Battle of Philippi. In the first encounter, Cassius was killed in action, leaving only Brutus as the leader of the conspirators.

Brutus's days, however, were numbered as well. Antony and Octavian proved to be too much, and Brutus was unskilled in the art of war, leading to his defeat at the Second Battle of Philippi. It was all over now. Without the means to oppose the Caesarians, Brutus committed suicide with a small group of his retainers.

Brutus's status as a Last Roman is mixed. While Brutus never held the office of Consul, and was never the leader of a fully fledged Roman state, he is symbolic of the end of the Roman Republic. Brutus can be seen as the leader of a group of men who sought to restore the Republic, by defeating the other men they saw as tyrants, destroying their beloved Republic. After the

defeat of Brutus and Cassius, there was never a real attempt to restore the Republic. The Second Triumvirate split Rome up between the three men, and after a final civil war, Octavian Caesar emerged as the victor. Octavian, now Augustus, became the first Emperor of Rome.²⁹ Brutus attempted to save the Roman Republic—in a sense, he is the last of the Republican-era Romans.

IV. Julius Nepos

By the time Julius Nepos took the throne, Rome had endured much since the last figures on this list. Rome had been transformed into an empire under the helm of Octavian Caesar, who took the title Augustus, First Emperor of Rome.³⁰ Rome had given up its pantheon of Gods and by 475 was fully Christianized.³¹ By the year 474 CE, when Nepos ascended to the purple, Rome was a shadow of its former self. The city itself, once thought to be untouchable, was sacked in 410³² and distant provinces had begun to splinter away. Furthermore, the Empire had been split into East and West, now operating as their own states. Western Rome was unable to even defend its home province of Italy, not even paying mind to the provinces of Africa, which went to the Vandals, or Britannia, which had been abandoned much prior.³³

Julius Nepos came to power like many Western Emperors did at this point: as a usurper, though he did have the support from the Eastern Emperor, Zeno.³⁴ With Eastern Rome's support, he had the ability to overthrow Glycerius and crown himself Roman Emperor. One of the few outposts left loyal to Rome was located in Northern Gaul, governed by a general named Syagrius. As Roman Emperor, Nepos focused his attention on Gaul, which was being ravaged by the Visigoths.³⁵ There wasn't much else he could do at this point: Hispania was lost, Africa was not only lost, but also a major source of piracy from the Vandals. The Eastern Empire had enough problems without trying to restore the Western Provinces, which couldn't be held even if

recapture was possible. Adding to this, the Western Economy was in shambles, barbarians were everywhere, and the city of Rome had been sacked twice before in the 400s. With this in mind, it's not hard to find the situation impossible. By the time Nepos came to power, the Western Emperor was more or less just the King of Italy in all but name. Despite his efforts to hold and restore Gaul, he failed in early 475 CE. The Visigoths were now firmly in control of Gaul, except for Syagrius's domain in the north³⁶. However, there was no way for Syagrius to assist Nepos; they were cut off geographically. Events yet again took a turn for the worse when a general appointed by Nepos himself, Orestes, revolted and marched on Ravenna—which was the new capital of the Western Roman Empire. Nepos had neither the funds or army to face this threat, so he fled to Dalmatia, where he was born.³⁷ He had only been Emperor for 13 months.

Orestes—the general who revolted—had his son proclaimed Roman Emperor, and Nepos was reduced to ruling Dalmatia, a province alongside the Adriatic coast. From there, Nepos perhaps hoped to contest the new rule of Italy. During his time in Dalmatia, he never gave up his claim to the Roman throne, instead viewing the new Emperor, Romulus Augustus, as a pretender king. Nepos's replacement Romulus Augustus didn't last long either, ruling for a scant few months until he too was deposed.³⁸ With this news, Nepos perhaps hoped this would be his chance to return and retake Rome. Indeed, he seemed to be planning something of the sort; however, he was murdered in in 480 CE by his followers, though the details are unclear as for why.³⁷ In his eyes, he died as an Emperor of Rome, the Final Emperor. Following his death, the barbarian King of Italy Odoacer invaded Dalmatia under the pretense of punishing those who had killed Nepos. This invasion was successful, and Nepos's domain was integrated into the new Italian Kingdom.³⁹

Nepos contends with Romulus Augustus for the title of “Last Roman”, or at least “Last Roman in the West”. Legally, Nepos is the correct answer, as Romulus Augustus’s rule was never accepted by the Eastern Empire or even the citizens he governed over. However, following his fall from power, Nepos never really had a chance to retake Rome. His grasp had been shaky from the moment he ascended to the throne, and he lacked support from his Eastern allies. Nepos’s death marks the end of any chance of Rome returning in the West. Though Eastern Rome would attempt to hold Western Rome again, it would never again return a Western Roman Emperor to the throne like Nepos was.

V. Romulus Augustus

At the young age of fourteen, Romulus Augustus was proclaimed emperor of Rome in the West. His father, the general Orestes, had used him as a power grab.⁴⁰ Of course, Romulus had no power—he was a mere child. Julius Nepos had fled to Dalmatia.³⁶ Nepos being deposed only weakened the decaying Rome state even further. Romulus’s reign is only a few months long, ruling from 31 October 475 CE to 4 September 476 CE.⁴⁰ Adding to his troubles was the fact the Eastern Empire refused to acknowledge him; they maintained Nepos was the rightful ruler of Rome.³⁴ Nepos still being alive and controlling a province didn’t help Romulus’s case. Even the citizens of Rome considered his rule to be illegitimate, calling him “Augustulus”, or literally, “Little Augustus” because of his young age.

In 476 CE, the death blow for the Western Roman Empire was readied. By this point, the last legions Rome controlled were not more than barbarians who had been bought out by Rome, called the “foederati”.⁴¹ What remained of the Roman Army proclaimed a barbarian named Odoacer “King of Italy”. To cement this new title, Odoacer marched into Italy and swiftly

executed Romulus's father Orestes, the man who truly ran the Empire. Within weeks of Odoacer's rebellion, Roman cities had fallen all across Italy. Ravenna fell in the same year, and Romulus gave up his throne to Odoacer. That was the end. Just like that, the Western Empire had been broken, in a flash.

Odoacer, perhaps feeling sorry for Romulus, did not kill him. Instead, the child-king was sent to live away from the capital, and was given a stipend to live off.⁴⁰ This was by far the best he could have hoped for. Odoacer now officially assumed his title and duties as King of Italy.³⁹ Hearing of the fall of Rome, the Eastern Roman Emperor Zeno made no effort to retake it. The message was loud and clear: Rome in the west no longer required an Emperor. Zeno granted his blessing to Odoacer to govern Italy as its king—though this was only ceremonial. Nominally, Odoacer recognized Nepos as Emperor; however, Nepos's death in 480 CE brought that to an end too.

Though not accepted by the Eastern Empire as the true Emperor, with historical hindsight we can see that the deposition of Romulus Augustus marks the end of the Roman Empire in the West. Never again would a Roman hold the title of Emperor in the West, though many men would seek that title out. Romulus's deposition marks the end of not only Roman power in the West, but is also seen as the beginning of the Medieval Age. Romulus is a Last Roman, perhaps more so than any other person listed thus far. Under his rule, Western Rome ceased to exist as a state. While the Eastern Empire would retake Rome temporarily, no man would ever rule from Rome like Romulus Augustus did. As an interesting detail, Romulus Augustus's name comes from the First Romans from certain times. Romulus, from the legendary first king of Rome, and Augustus, from the first emperor of Rome, Augustus Caesar. Whether or not people at the time

recognized Romulus's rule as legitimate, we can look back and see he was in practice, the true Final Emperor—not Julius Nepos.

VI. Syagrius

Ever since Caesar's conquest of Gaul, it had become a key province of Rome. It provided much to the Empire: a vibrant tax base, agricultural centers for wine and, most importantly, a line of defense for Italy. Gallic and Celtic raids into Rome had ended after the conclusion of the Gallic Wars, though the Barbarian invasions of the Third and Fourth centuries brought chaos back into Gaul.⁴¹

The point of this is to describe how important Gaul was to the Empire as a province. It's no surprise then that Gaul was one of Rome's last holdouts, even after the collapse of the Roman government in Italy. Among the rump states—the remnant of a once larger and more powerful state—that survived Rome's fall in 476 CE was a part of northern Gaul, governed by Syagrius. Syagrius was born in 430 CE, son of a Master of Soldiers, which was a prestigious position within the Roman military. Functionally, Syagrius was also the king and ruler of the lands he held domain over, although he did not see himself as a king.³⁵ In Syagrius's eyes, he was simply a governor of a Roman province, awaiting the return of Roman authority in the region.

Syagrius's Germanic neighbors viewed him another way, referring to him as “King of The Romans”, and calling his domain “Roman Kingdom”. Known to us as the Kingdom of Soissons, Syagrius represented the last of Roman authority in Gaul.⁴² Syagrius stood alone, without allies or support.

Seizing on the moment, a Frankish warlord named Clovis I deemed Syagrius's domain to be ripe for conquest.⁴² Together with other bands of Frankish petty lords, they marched towards

Soissons. Syagrius met this force at The Battle of Soissons in 486 CE and was decisively defeated.⁴³ The details of this battle are hard to come by, but what's known is that following this defeat, Syagrius fled to the court of Alaric II, King of the Visigoths. Under threat of invasion from Clovis, Alaric handed Syagrius back to Clovis, and he was put to death in 487 CE.⁴³ Syagrius's defeat marks the end of Gallo-Roman states existing, permanently. Never again would Rome hold power over any parts of Gaul. The Kingdom of Soissons is considered a rump state, which is the remnant of a once much larger and powerful state. By this thought, Syagrius was a rump king, the last man to wield any sort of power over a once powerful state.

Syagrius is not a Last Roman in the traditional sense; however, his death and the loss of his kingdom marks the end of an era, an era of Roman states existing in the West. While Syagrius was basically a king of the land he ruled, in his own eyes, he was still a Roman—not a king, but a governor, waiting for the return of Roman authority in the region. Syagrius never had a chance to retake Rome or receive any help; instead, his state was that of one near death, a state in decay, waiting for someone to come along and deal the final blow.

VII. Justinian I

Eastern Rome found itself in a strange state in 527 CE. Western Rome had fallen only around 50 years ago,³⁹ and its existence was still within living memory for many Eastern citizens. When Justin I died in the summer of 527 CE, the crown of Rome passed to his nephew, Justinian.⁴⁴ Eastern Rome was at peace during this time, though tensions were on the rise with the Persians to the East, and the various barbarians who had begun to establish states in the Balkans. However in the West, all of Rome had fallen. Hispania had been lost to the Visigoths, Carthage and North Africa had been overrun by the Vandals, and Britain had been abandoned by

Rome much prior. Even the Imperial heartlands of Gaul and Italy had been conquered, first by the barbarian king Odacaer, and later by Frankish kings.³⁹

Justinian was born a peasant, no more than a simple swineherd. Notably, his first tongue was in Latin—perhaps⁴⁵, the last Roman emperor to be raised speaking it, as all others would speak Greek natively. When Justin traveled to Constantinople, capital of the East, he brought along a young Justinian with him and gave the boy an education. Justin was a member of the Imperial guard, and Justinian was also raised to that position with his uncle when his time came. After the death of Emperor Anastasius, Justin and Justinian were able to come out on top of the power struggle, with Justin being declared Emperor of Rome on 9 July, 518 CE. Justinian played an active role in Justin's rule, even being declared co-emperor alongside his uncle, as to ensure it was clear that Justinian was to succeed him.⁴⁵

Justinian, upon taking the purple, launched a war against the Persians. His loyal general, Belisarius was able to hand the Persian Empire a defeat initially; however the two empires were almost equal in power. Thus, in 532, Justinian signed the Perpetual Peace with Persia, securing the Eastern frontier from Rome's main rival.⁴⁶ Now, Justinian was free to look West, towards old Roman territory, and begin what would become his life's work: The Restoration of the West.

Before Justinian had the chance to make a move on old Roman lands, he was confronted with a series of domestic problems to face. Justinian sought to reform the law code, resulting in one of the world's greatest law codes, The Corpus Julius Civilis, or the Code of Justinian. It now serves as the foundation for many Western code of laws, even today.⁴⁷ Secondly, Justinian was also forced to deal with a major result in Constantinople called the Nika Revolts, which threatened to not only undo all of his progress so far, but even came close to deposing him as Emperor.⁴⁸ Briefly, Justinian considered fleeing into exile, but chose not to after his wife, the

actress Theodora, convinced him it was better to die as Emperor, rather than to flee. Justinian was able to put down the riots with help from his generals—however, the cost was high, with nearly after the city burned and over 30,000 dead.⁴⁸

Justinian's first target was North Africa—ever since the conquest of Rome's rival, Carthage, Africa had been a wealthy part of the Empire. And secondly, the reconquest of Africa would be useful as a staging ground for Justinian's true target, Rome itself. In 533, Justinian's general Belisarius sailed to North Africa, and won a series of battles against the Vanadalic kings, resulting in the capture of Carthage itself, and the formal incorporation of North Africa into the Eastern Roman Empire. Belisarius was rewarded with a triumph in Constantinople for his victories- one of the grandest honors the Empire could bestow.⁴⁹ To Justinian though, this was just the beginning.

In 535, dynastic struggles gave Justinian the opportunity he'd been waiting for: under the pretext of restoring order in Italy and avenging the death of a Gothic noblewoman, Justinian ordered the invasion of Sicily. Again, Belisarius served as the commander of the operation. Much like Africa, Sicily was conquered quickly, and following that, the Italian War began in earnest. Belisarius was able to blitz across Italy and capture Rome itself basically unopposed. For the first time since 476 CE, Rome had returned to the control of a Roman emperor.⁵⁰ To Justinian, his dreams had finally come to fruition. But his glory in this moment wasn't meant to last.

While Justinian and Belisarius waged war across the Mediterranean, the Persians in the East began to see opportunity: Justinian's greatest general and much of his legions were in the West, preoccupied by fighting barbarians in Northern Italy and Dalmatia, on the Adriatic Coast. Despite the peace being signed in 532 CE, Persia launched a full scale invasion into Eastern

Rome in 540 CE. The outbreak of a war on a new front forced Justinian to redirect funds and soldiers to hold off Persia and support smaller, regional Roman allies on the border and in the Caucasus mountains. During this time, the Goths made considerable progress against Rome in Italy—even recapturing Rome from Justinian and almost forcing Rome off the Italian Peninsula.⁵⁰

Adding to the list of crises piling up was the emergence of a sickness, first appearing in Egypt, and then spreading all across the Mediterranean, and most severely in Constantinople. This was the Plague of Justinian, and it would nearly bring both the Empire and emperor himself to their knees. At its height, one out of every four people died in Constantinople.⁵¹ The damage done was unfathomable, both in terms of human suffering and losses to the Empire. Tax revenues plummeted, and Eastern Rome found itself unable to securely fund public works, two wars, and the general cost of the Empire. Even Justinian was struck by the sickness, though he was able to survive. Despite the toll the Empire endured, it did not collapse. And to that end, neither would Justinian.

As the Plague of Justinian faded, the war in Italy was renewed. At the peak of Roman success, almost all of Italy had been captured, though now only parts of the coastline and Sicily remained. Justinian ordered another invasion, and this time, he was finally successful in the reconquest of Italy. By 553 CE, Gothic power in the region was gone, and Italy was again paying taxes towards the Roman treasury.⁵⁰ Adding to the good news, parts of Hispania had been conquered again as well, with Eastern Rome becoming the most powerful state in Europe by 555 CE. Justinian would die a decade after this, the crown passing to Justin II⁴⁵.

Following Justinian's death, the Empire began a rapid decline. Almost all of Italy was lost to the Lombards, war with Persia continued and became more severe, and the Empire's

economy stagnated. Justinian's conquest had returned imperial glory to Eastern Rome, but the cost had been high: thousands and thousands of people killed, millions of pounds of gold spent—all on conquest the Empire neither needed, nor was able to hold onto in the long run. Justinian's wars had drained the Empire of resources it desperately needed to defend against both old rivals in Persia and new threats, such as barbarians in the Balkans and the rise of Islam in Arabia. In a more symbolic ending, Justinian's death also marked the end of Latin as an official language, for the most part. While sources vary, after Justinian's death, Greek became the language of Rome. Around this time is where Western historians sources will stop calling this state Eastern Rome and instead the Byzantine Empire. Justinian's reign is a serious demarcation line in the history of the Eastern Roman Empire, representing the peak of Roman power. After Justinian's death, Eastern Rome would never be able exercise its influence in the same way.

VIII. Constantine XI

Eastern Rome, or Byzantium, had entered the Medieval Era as one of the most powerful states on Earth. After reaching the zenith of power, Eastern Rome began a slow and very, very long decline, marked by a loss of Asian and African territory controlled by Rome, and meanwhile in Europe, the Balkans were ravaged by Bulgarians, Serbs, and Hungarians, while Italy was lost to the Lombards forever.⁵² And even the Greek provinces, once key parts of the Empire, were lost as well.

One of the crucial events precipitating the decline of the Eastern Roman Empire was the Sack of Constantinople in 1204 CE.⁵³ The Fourth Crusade was supposed to reach the Holy Lands, but due to the influence of Venice, the Crusading troops turned towards Constantinople, sacked the city, and broke up the Roman Empire. Temporarily, Rome was split into a few smaller

states; however, they were reunified by the Nicaean Empire in 1261 CE⁵³. Though the Eastern Roman Empire was now reunited under Greek control again, it would never be able to reach its former glory.

The damage done to Eastern Rome over the years was impossible to overcome. By the 1300s, they were just holding on, shadows of the former great empire they used to be. The rise of the Ottoman Empire was another issue Eastern Rome wasn't able to handle, and they would prove to be too much. What few cities in Asia Minor were left fell, and then so did the European provinces. By 1453 CE, the Eastern Roman Empire was only the city of Constantinople and a few forts and castles in Greece.⁵²

With the ascension of Mehmed II of the Ottoman Empire, the rope around the Byzantine neck was tightened. The Ottoman fleet was strengthened under Mehmed's watchful eye, and within a few years of Mehmed's rise to power, he had more or less cut Constantinople off from the rest of the world. Constantinople was a major city, in the heart of the trade routes that made the Ottoman Empire rich. Even after the sack of Constantinople in 1204 CE⁵⁴, the city was still a very important crossroad between Europe and Asia. It was now the last holdout of a civilization over a thousand years old.

On the other side of the walls inside of Constantinople, the Byzantine Emperor, Constantine XI, was very aware of the situation he found himself in. One of his first acts was to search for some sort of allies who could help support Constantinople should the Ottomans come knocking. In this, he was mostly unsuccessful— despite an initial truce with the Turks, Constantine was unable to truly find any major powers who would be willing to fight a full on war with the Ottomans over a distant city in the East.

In 1453, Mehmed II raised an army, supposedly between 80,000-200,000 men strong, and marched towards Constantinople. If Constantine XI was lucky, he could perhaps field an army of 1,000 men, a mere fraction of what Mehmed had rallied. The Siege of Constantinople is a well documented and studied battle, but the most important part for our purposes is the conclusion of the battle. After a few months of constant siege warfare, Mehmed II's troops broke through the old Theodosian Walls and marched into the city. While sources disagree on what exactly happened to the emperor, it's known that Constantine XI was killed in the fighting, dying as the Turkish troops surged into the city. With Constantinople now in the hands of the Ottomans, the Eastern Roman Empire dissolved into nothing. What few forts and lands Eastern Rome controlled outside of Constantinople would all fall as well. ⁵⁵

Constantine XI's death and the Fall of Constantinople mark the end of the Eastern Roman Empire and the end of Rome itself. While the Ottomans, other states such as Russia, and the Holy Roman Empire would claim themselves the successors to Rome, the collapse of Eastern Rome is the definitive end of a Roman state that was founded long ago. Constantine's status as a Last Roman isn't in doubt at all. Perhaps most respectable of all was Constantine's decision to not simply hand over Constantinople, and even choosing to die with his empire. His death in the streets of his city is an impressive show of dedication to his empire.

Conclusion

Throughout history, it's easy to look and draw lines in the sand, marking very clean ends of historical states and ideas. But as can be seen in this paper, endings in history are never that clean-cut. Instead of looking at the endings in history as definitive, you can instead see endings as new beginnings as well. When Tarquin was overthrown and the Roman Kingdom was reimagined as the Roman Republic, Rome was not lost; Rome was reborn, instead. When Caesar

began to seize more power over the Republic's institutions, and Brutus fought to restore it—ending with Augustus reforming the Republic into an Empire—Rome was still not over. When Julius Nepos and Romulus Augustus were overthrown and the city of Rome itself was lost, Rome as an entity was still not defunct. When Justinian died, and his Empire transitioned to a more Greek-based state, becoming more so the Byzantine Empire, the spirit of Rome still endured. And still, when Constantine XI died in the streets of Constantinople, you could argue the spirit of Rome still survived.

What this shows us is that continuity in history is a funny thing. You can look at each of these historical figures as an ending and a beginning in and of themselves. For all intents and purposes, I view Constantine XI as the true Last Roman, but arguments could be made that other later figures throughout history may fill that role better. Constantine XI's death coincides with the Fall of Constantinople, which is a good ending point for the Roman Empire. His decision to stay in Constantinople and go down with the city rather than hand it over to another empire is one worthy of respect. Since the time of Constantine The Great, Constantinople had been a major city for the Empire, serving as the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire as well. With its fall, the seat of Roman power for over a thousand years was now under the rule of a foreign empire. Though some historians might argue that Constantine XI was a Byzantine emperor, I would argue that Eastern Rome never stopped being Roman; that Eastern Roman Empire unfolded into the Byzantine Empire. Any difference in semantics is almost entirely arbitrary. Thus, Constantine XI represents the end of Rome as the ideal Last Roman.

Over the course of this paper, it has become clear that trying to find exact, perfect endings throughout history isn't as easy as it seems. Instead, history never seems to be clearly demarcated. We can see this theme throughout the historical figures studied in this paper,

especially during the late Western Empire, when several men were all contending for the title of Last Roman and all alive at the same time. Julius Nepos and Romulus Augustus both competed for the throne of Roman emperor, though Syagrius's domain—a Roman state—to the north in Gaul outlived both of them. Even Julius Caesar and Brutus represented different endings of Rome. The semi-legendary Tarquin of the Roman Kingdom also represents his own ending of something uniquely Roman. Rather than trying to chop all of history up into neat endings and beginnings, it is important to view it as a steady flow of constant change.

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