

THE ROMAN EMPIRE

IN THE FIRST CENTURY

Episode 1 – Order from Chaos

Narrator: Two thousand years ago, at the dawn of the first century, the world was ruled from Rome. Rome was in turmoil. Civil war had engulfed the empire's capital city. Dictators seized power, and the Roman future seemed bleak. But from the chaos, the Roman Empire would rise stronger and more dazzling than ever before. Within a few short years, it would stretch from Britain, across Europe, to southern Egypt, from North Africa around the Mediterranean, to the Middle East. It would embrace hundreds of languages and religions and would till those diverse cultures into a rich soil, from which western civilizations would grow. Rome would become the world's first and most enduring super power, spanning continents. The glory days of Rome were studded with names that reach out to us across two millennia: Ovid and Nero, Seneca and Caligula. But the story of Rome is more than the story of famous men. Millions of less familiar figures struck different chords in the symphony of empire. People such as the wealthy benefactor, Umachia. The rebel queen, Boudicca, and countless uncelebrated soldiers and slaves, senators and peasants. Above them all, is this man, Caesar Augustus. This was the emperor who set the tone for the astonishing renaissance of Rome.

Narrator: This series tells the story of Augustus and his people, the men and women who wrested order from chaos. They shaped the greatest empire the world had ever seen, and launched the Roman Empire in the first century.

Narrator: Two thousand years after Egypt's pharaoh's reigned supreme, four hundred years after the flowering of Greek culture, three hundred years after Alexander the great - a boy named Octavian was born in a small Italian town. The child would one day be called Augustus, and his birth, one ancient historian tells us, would be gilded by legend. His father, leading an army through distant lands, went to a sacred grove, seeking prophecy on the boy's future. When wine was poured on the altar, flames shot up to heaven. The signs were heard only once before, by Alexander the Great. The priest declared that Augustus would be ruler of the world.

Narrator: The story is told by Suetonius. Writing at the turn of the first century, he based his biography on eyewitness accounts, on common gossip and on research conducted as imperial librarian. In truth, he writes that the prospects of young Augustus were far from grand. The boy was sickly, with few connections. His family were country people. His father was the first in their line to join the Senate. But worse – Augustus was born into dangerous times. Civil war had flared for decades. Feuding nobles fought to gain power for themselves. And Rome's traditions of open government were often trampled underfoot. So too, were innocent bystanders. When Augustus was just four years old, his father

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suddenly died. Without a male mentor, the boy's future looked bleak.

But in 49 BC, when he was 13, Augustus' fortunes took a dramatic turn. For in that year, his great uncle, Julius Caesar, gained the upper hand on the battlefield. Leading an army across the Rubicon River, Caesar declared himself master of Rome and ruler of an empire still aspiring to greatness.

Narrator: At the time of Julius Caesar, the Roman Empire was a bit like a boy who has reached six feet tall, yet he's only fourteen or fifteen years old. He's not yet a man. The externals of empire were there – the armies were there. The Romans governed most of the coast of the Mediterranean, with the exception of Egypt. However, they had not yet learned to bring that into a functioning organism. The past decades of internal fighting had weakened the empire. Northern tribes harried the borders. Enemies were confronting Rome in the east. And the province of Spain threatened to break free. Julius Caesar moved quickly to bolster the frontiers, and his own legacy. Caesar had no heir, so when Augustus completed a dangerous mission, Caesar adopted the teenager in his will.

Karl Galinsky, Professor of Classics, University of Texas, Austin: Augustus realized this was a tremendous opportunity. Mind you, he had no military training, but he was the heir of the greatest political figure that was under the Roman sky at that time – and he cashed in on it.

Narrator: It was a heady opportunity for Augustus, but also a perilous challenge. For in 44 BC, foreigners were not the only threat to stability. There were enemies within Caesar's small circle of advisors. They murdered Caesar at a meeting of the Senate. For the second time in his life, Augustus lost a father. Now, on the verge of manhood, he thrust himself into the maelstrom of Roman politics.

Keith Bradley, Professor of Greek and Roman Studies, University of Victoria: The death of Julius Caesar was not just a turning point in Augustus' life, it was a turning point in world history. Augustus was extremely young at this time, only in his nineteenth year. Yet when he knew that he had been made Caesar's heir, he immediately took up the political legacy of Caesar. He entered the mainstream of Roman politics. He didn't hesitate to try to avenge his father. That meant, of course, stepping onto the stage of politics, raising an army and immersing himself in a contest for supreme political power in Rome.

Narrator: He displayed brutality against enemy prisoners. Once, when a father and son were begging for their lives, he ordered that they should draw lots to determine which one should be executed. The father offered himself and was killed. Because of this, the son committed suicide. Augustus watched them both die.

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Narrator: Suetonius describes the crisis as “trial by fire” and Augustus didn’t flinch from the task. He formed a strategic alliance with Marc Antony, a powerful general, who also wanted supremacy. Together they massacred their enemies in the capital. Then they pursued their rivals to the shores of Greece, where they fought and won two of the bloodiest battles in Roman history. When the carnage ended, the empire was theirs. Augustus and Antony divided the spoils of war.

Narrator: Augustus remained in Rome. But Antony took control of Egypt, a land not formally joined to Rome, but firmly under the empire’s command. There, he joined forces with Egypt’s queen. Ancient historians, like Cassius Dio, believed that was a fateful move. When Antony fell deeply in love with his new ally, many feared the ambitious queen was scheming to rule Rome herself. Her name was Cleopatra.

Narrator: Cleopatra’s brazen desire for passion and wealth was insatiable. By love, she had made herself queen of Egypt. But she failed in her goal to become queen of the Romans.

Judith P. Hallett, Professor of Classics, University of Maryland, College Park: Cleopatra did not enjoy a good press in Rome. What really irritated people about Cleopatra was that she was a powerful woman from the east, and from a very wealthy country with a monarchic system of government. She therefore symbolized lack of moderation, lack of control, frenzied fury, everything that Rome tried not to be. Cleopatra and Antony were cast as leaders of the evil empire.

Narrator: Antony’s alliance with Augustus withered. But Augustus struck first. The poet, Virgil, later cast the battle as an epic struggle of east against west.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Standing high on the stern, Augustus leads the Italians into battle. Carrying with him the bite of the Senate and the people. Opposing him, with barbarian wealth, is Antony, suited for battle. He carries with him the powers of the orient. And to the scandal of all, his Egyptian wife, their monstrous divinities raised weapons against our noble, Roman gods.”

Narrator: Three quarters of the Egyptian fleet was destroyed. Anthony and Cleopatra committed suicide - and the land of the pharaohs was formally annexed to the Roman Empire.

Judith Hallett: The annexation of Egypt for Augustus was immensely important. It was the equivalent of Hitler’s troops marching through the streets of Paris. Here was a wealthy country that was going to be providing food, that was going to be

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providing land. But above all, it was a country of great cultural prestige, and once Rome had Egypt as part of its empire, they had truly arrived.

Reconstruction voiceover: “There is nothing that man can wish from the gods, nothing the gods can do for men which Augustus, when he returned to the city, did not do for the public, the Roman people, and the entire world. Civil wars were finished – foreign wars ended and everywhere the fury of arms was put to rest.”

Narrator: Upon Augustus’ return to a war torn Rome in 29 BC, the city went wild with enthusiasm. The triumphant general vowed to restore peace and security. It was a promise he would keep. The victory of Augustus launched a period of stunning cultural vitality, of religious renewal and of economic well being that spread throughout the empire. It would be called the ‘Pax Romana’ – the peace of Rome. To many, it marked the return of Rome’s mythic and glorious past.

Narrator: But Augustus himself would never return to the past. He was now a hardened thirty-two-year-old man – the sole ruler of the Greco-Roman world, Rome’s first emperor. Victory had been costly, but the greatest challenge still lay ahead, for to avoid the fate of Julius Caesar, Augustus must disarm the Senate and charm the masses. He must do better than win the war. He must win the peace. That challenge would occupy the rest of his life.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Let me step forward, clear my throat, and announce that I am a native of Soula, a few days’ journey eastward from Rome.”

Narrator: While Augustus fought his way to the pinnacle of power, a boy named Ovid was coming of age under less demanding circumstances.

Reconstruction voiceover: “I was the second son, a year to the day younger than my brother. We always had two cakes on the birthday we shared, and were close in other ways as well. We studied together, and then went up to Rome to seek our fortunes. I used to waste my time trying to write verses. My father called it waste. He disapproved of any pursuit where you could not turn a decent living, and always used to say, ‘Homer died poor.’”

Narrator: Ovid came from the same stock as Augustus. They were both landed gentry, and like Augustus, the young man found his identity and his ambitions moulded by his demanding family.

Reconstruction voiceover: “I tried to give up poetry, to stick to prose on serious subjects, but frivolous minds like mine attract frivolous inspirations, some too good not to fool with. I kept returning to my bad habits, secretive and ashamed. I couldn’t help it, I felt like an impostor in serious matters, but I owed it to my father

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and my brother to try to do my duty.”

Narrator: By Roman law, a father wielded absolute control over his children. Those who displeased him could be disowned, sold into slavery or even killed. The young Ovid tried to meet his father’s expectations. He married, studied law – but the strain proved unendurable. Miserable, Ovid and a friend set out on a journey of self-discovery.

Reconstruction voiceover: “We toured the magnificent cities of Asia. We watched the flames of Mount Etna light up the heavens. We ploughed the waves in a painted ship, and also travelled by wagon. Often the roads seemed short, as we were lost in conversation. When we walked, our words outnumbered our steps - and we had too much to say, even for the long evenings of supper.”

Narrator - Eighteen months later, Ovid settled in Rome, older and more self-confident than before. He resolved to become a poet. He cultivated new friends in Roman literary circles, and soon, Ovid made a name for himself as Rome’s reigning poet – of stolen kisses.

Reconstruction voiceover: “So your husband is coming to this dinner party? I hope he gags on his food. Listen – and learn what you must do. When he settles on his couch to eat, go to him with a straight face. Look modest and lie back beside him. But secretly touch me with your foot. Don’t let him drape his arms around your neck, don’t rest your gentle head against his chest – don’t welcome his fingers to your lap or to your eager nipples. Most of all, no kissing. When dinner is done, your husband will close the bedroom door. But whatever the night shall bring, tell me tomorrow – you refused.”

Keith Bradley: It’s a mistake to think that Ovid’s poetry can be read very literally in purely autobiographical terms. That wouldn’t be true, I think, of any poetry from antiquity. But at the same time, Ovid is writing of subjects of which he has some sort of experience and he certainly, through the love poetry, opens up a world that is very different in tone and quality from the official atmosphere.

Narrator: While Ovid bloomed as a man of words, the new emperor thrived as a man of action. He rebuilt Rome – and his own family. Divorcing his wife, Augustus married his heavily pregnant mistress – Livia. The move raised eyebrows and hackles, as love was not the only motive. Although Augustus shunned the trappings of absolute power, many suspected he was building a dynasty – a line of heirs to rule Rome for generations to come.

Narrator: Augustus knew it was a dangerous move. He knew that Julius Caesar had been murdered for appearing as a king. Augustus would not make the same

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mistake. He relinquished high office and struck a delicate balance between fact and fiction.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Having, by universal consent, acquired control of all affairs, I transferred government to the Senate and the people of Rome."

Judith Hallet: Augustus was a very cagey political leader, because he pretended to be restoring all of these republican political traditions. In fact, what he was running was a full-fledged dynastic monarchy.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Augustus conquered Cantabria, Aquitania, Pannonia, Dalmatia and all of Illyricum, as well as Raetia."

Narrator: Augustus not only changed the empire, he expanded it. Egypt had been added early in his career. Soon, Northern Spain was joined. Augustus drove across Europe, into Germany, and he united east and west by adding modern Hungary, Austria, the Balkans and central Turkey. These victories employed Roman soldiers and senators, and offered welcome distractions to the city's poor. When Augustus wasn't staging chariot races or gladiator shows, he displayed exotic animals, the quarry of Rome's far-flung empire. A rhinoceros appeared in the arena, Asian tigers in the theatre and a giant serpent in the forum.

Karl Galinsky: One key constituency for Augustus was the plebeian population of Rome, and that is basically the city mob. You have several hundred thousand folks here who have no jobs, and to put it very simply, who need to be kept off the streets, and kept from making trouble, because it's a very volatile, combustible mixture.

Narrator: The volatile mix that made up Rome stayed quiet for the first four years of Augustus' rule. Then, in 23 BC, events took a critical turn. Cassius Dio writes that a series of disasters convinced the people that Augustus needed not less power, but more.

Reconstruction voiceover: "The city was flooded by the overflowing river and many things were struck by lightning. Then a plague passed through Italy and no one could work the land. The Romans thought these misfortunes were caused because Augustus had relinquished his office. They wished to appoint him dictator. A mob barricaded the Senate inside its building and threatening to burn them alive, forced the Senate to vote Augustus absolute ruler.

Narrator: The demands threatened to unsettle the emperor's precarious political balance. Augustus fell to his knees before the riders. He tore his toga and beat

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his chest. He promised the mob that he would personally take control of the grain supply. But Augustus refused to be called a dictator. The crowd disbanded, but the lesson was clear. Augustus was riding a tiger. To keep order on the frontiers, the streets and the Senate was a super human task. Super human skills were needed. Luckily for Rome, Augustus had them.

Karl Galinsky: Then something very fortuitous happens: Halley's Comet shows up and the word is given out by Augustus that this is the soul of Julius Caesar ascending into heaven. So from this point on he is called Julius Caesar the divine. Politically it became very potent, because what does Augustus do at this point? On all his coinage on all his writings, on all his symbols, whatever, he puts on the words "DF", meaning Son of the Divine. And it's really quite an asset in politics to be the Son of the Divine. There are modern politicians I think would be very jealous of being able to do that.

Narrator: Augustus enhanced his pious new identity with stories of his lean habits. It was said that he slept in a modest house, and slept on a low bed, that he ate common foods, coarse bread, common cheese, and sometimes, even less.

Reconstruction voiceover: "My dear Tiberius, not even a Jew observes a fast as diligently on the Sabbath as I have today. I ate nothing until the early hours of evening when I nibbled two bites before my rub down."

Narrator: Moral change, Augustus began to argue, was the enemy of Rome. He believed that its future ran through its past, through the restoration of the values he thought had first made Rome great.

Reconstruction voiceover: "I renewed many traditions which were fading in our age. I restored eighty-two temples of the gods, neglecting none that required repair at the time."

Narrator: In public, Augustus led by example. He sacrificed animals in traditional rituals and he re-established traditional social rules. New laws assigned theatre seats by social rank. Women were confined to the back rows. Adultery was outlawed; marriage and children were encouraged. To many, Roman society had recovered its true course. The son of a god was building an empire for the ages.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Who can find words to adequately describe the advancements of these years? Authority has been returned to the government, majesty to the Senate, and influence to the courts. Protests in the theatre have been stopped, integrity is honored, depravity is punished."

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Narrator: But amid the applause, there were also cries of protest. The emperor's new traditional values rankled friends and enemies alike. It even rankled his own daughter, Julia. Long a pawn of family politics, Julia assumed that she was exempt from her father's stringent views. She was wrong. And in the coming years, Augustus, son of a god, would have to confront Augustus the father.

Reconstruction voiceover: "If there is anyone here who is a novice in the art of love, let him read my book. With study, he will love like a professional."

Narrator: As the emperor, Augustus firmly charted a course of moral rigor. The poet Ovid staked out different ground. He was now Rome's most famous living poet and his boldness grew in step with his reputation. Having all but exhausted the conventions of love poetry, he decided to stretch them. He began composing a manual of practical tips on adultery.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Step one – stroll under a shady colonnade. Don't miss the shrine of Adonis, but the theatre is your best hunting ground. There you will find women to satisfy any desire, just as ants come and go, so the cultured ladies swarm to the games. They come for the show – and to make a show of themselves. There are so many I often reel from the choice."

Narrator: Many Romans yearned to follow their emperor back to the good old days of stern Roman virtue. But others reveled in the promises of Rome's newfound peace. Ovid was one of them. To the youthful poet, old limits seemed meaningless.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Do not doubt you can have any girl you wish. Some give in, others resist but all love to be propositioned. And even if you fail, rejection doesn't hurt. Why should you fail? Women always welcome pleasure and find novelty exciting."

Narrator: Indeed, the earlier civil wars had unleashed enormous social change. Some women had gained political clout, new rights and new freedoms. Tradition holds that one such woman was Julia, the emperor's only child.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Julia had a love of letters, and was well educated – a given in that family. She also had a gentle nature and no cruel intentions. Together these brought her great esteem as a woman."

Narrator: Julia didn't reject traditional values wholesale. She had long endured her father's overbearing control. She dutifully married three times to further his dynastic ambitions, and she bore five children. Her two boys, Guyus and Luccius were cherished by Augustus as probable heirs. But like Ovid, Julia expected

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more from the peace. She was clever and vivacious and she had an irreverent tongue that cut across the grain of Roman convention. Her legendary wit was passed through the centuries by a late Roman writer called Macrobius.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Several times her father ordered her in a manner both doting and scolding to moderate her lavish clothes and keep less mischievous company. Once he saw her in a revealing dress. He disapproved, but held his tongue. The next day, in a different dress, she embraced her father with modesty. He could not contain his joy and said 'Now isn't this dress more suited to the daughter of Augustus?' Julia retorted, 'Today I am dressed for my father's eyes. Yesterday I dressed for my husband.'"

Narrator: But apparently, Julia's charms were not reserved for her husband alone. The emperor's daughter took many lovers.

Judith Hallet: Her dalliances were so well known that people were actually surprised when her children resembled her second husband, who was the father of her five children. She wittily replied, "Well that's because I never take on a passenger unless I already have a full cargo." The meaning here is that she waited until she was already pregnant before undertaking these dalliances, so concerned was she to protect the bloodlines of these offspring.

Narrator: Julia, like Ovid, was a testament to her times. But neither of them were average Romans. The life they represented shocked traditional society to the core. And as Julia entered her thirty-eighth year, crisis loomed.

Reconstruction voiceover: "In that year, a scandal broke out in the emperor's own home. It was shameful to discuss, horrible to remember."

Narrator: One Roman soldier voiced deep revulsion at Julia's extraordinary self-indulgence.

Reconstruction voiceover: "Julia, ignoring her father Augustus, did everything which is shameful for a woman to do, whether through extravagance or lust. She counted her sins as though counting her blessings, and asserted her freedom to ignore the laws of decency.

Narrator: Julia's behavior erupted into a full-blown political crisis, which was marked by over-blown claims. The emperor's daughter was rumored to hold nightly revels in Rome's public square. She was said to barter sexual favors from the podium where her father addressed the people. When the gossip reached Augustus, the emperor flew into a violent rage. He refused to see visitors. Upon emerging, Suetonius reports, he publicly denounced his only child.

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Reconstruction voiceover: “He wrote a letter, advising the Senate of her misbehavior, but was absent when it was read. He secluded himself out of shame, and even considered a death sentence for his daughter. He grew more obstinate, when the Roman people came to him several times, begging for her sake. He cursed the crowd that they should have such daughters and such wives.”

Narrator: As a father, Augustus could not abide Julia’s behavior. As an emperor, he could not tolerate the embarrassment. Augustus banished Julia for the rest of her life.

Reconstruction voiceover: “I was going to pass over the ways a clever girl might elude a husband or a watchful guard. But since you need help – here is my advice.”

Narrator: Soon after Julia’s exile, Ovid released his salacious poem. It couldn’t have been more poorly timed.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Of course a guard stands in your way, but you can still write. Compose love letters while alone in the bathroom and send them out with an accomplice. She can hide them next to her warm flesh, under her breasts or bound beneath her foot. Should your guard get wind of these schemes, she can offer her skin for paper and carry out notes written on her body.”

Narrator: Ovid’s poetry extolled behavior for which the emperor’s daughter was banished. Her fate loomed large as a warning. For the present, the emperor remained mute towards Rome’s most gifted rebel. Ovid turned his hand to less provocative forms of poetry. He remarried, and he embraced a new appreciation for discretion.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Enjoy forbidden pleasures in their place. But when you dress, don’t forget your mask of decorum. An innocent face hides more than a lying tongue.”

Narrator: Ovid was on notice. The order of Augustus had firm bounds of propriety and Ovid had tested them to the fullest.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Now consider the dangers of night. Tiles fall from the rooftop and crack you on the head. And the drunken hooligan, spoiling for a fight, cannot rest without a brawl. What can you do when a raving madman confronts you? Or tenants throw their broken pots out the window? You’re courting disaster if you go to dinner before writing your will.”

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Narrator: At the turn of the first century, the poet Juvenal, was writing verses, which exposed much of Rome to scorn. He was acerbic and had a keen eye for the gritty realities of urban life.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Our apartment block is a tottering ruin. The building manager props it up with slender poles and plasters over the gaping cracks. Then he bids us sleep safe and sound in his wretched death trap.”

Ronald Mellor, Professor of History, UCLA: I don't think our notion of Rome bears much relation to the Rome of every day life. Because what is left today are the big public buildings, not the squalid hovels without plumbing and sanitary conditions that ordinary people lived in. That's precisely the reason members of the elite preferred to withdraw up into the hills, and to have their villas up on the hills, a little bit away from the noise and away from the stench and away from that incredible hoard of people pressing close together.

Reconstruction voiceover: “I would love to live where there are no fears, in the dark of night. Even now, I smell fire and hear a neighbor cry out for water as he struggles to save his measly belongings. Smoke pours out from the third story as flames move upwards, but the poor wretch who lives at the top with the leaking roof and roosting birds, is oblivious to the danger, and sure to burn.”

Narrator: In the year 4, in the imperial palace, the emperor, Augustus also lost sleep, but not from fear of fire. Now an old man of sixty-six, Augustus has lost much of his youthful vigor.

Reconstruction voiceover: “His vision had faded in his left eye, his teeth were few, widely spaced and worn down, his hair wispy and yellowed. His skin was irritated by scratching and vehement scraping, so that he had chronic rough spots, resembling ring worm.”

Narrator: As the emperor neared death, plots to succeed him sprouted. His grandsons and intended heirs had both died, unexpectedly. And the emperor himself lived under constant threat of assassination. Speaking for Augustus, one ancient historian voiced his dilemma: “Whereas solitude is dreadful,” he wrote, “company is also dreadful - the very men who protect us are most terrifying.”

Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, Director, British School, Rome: In many ways, Augustus looked so solid, and what he created looked so solid you forget the fragility. I think contemporaries were very aware of that fragility. And surely Augustus was, he was – over anxious, in a sense, to provide a secure system after he'd gone.

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Reconstruction voiceover: At this time, there were unusually strong earthquakes. The Tiber pulled down the bridge and flooded the city for seven days. There was a partial eclipse of the sun, and famine developed.

Narrator: Ancient historians report that natural disasters predicted political ones. In the year 6, soldiers, the backbone of the empire, refused to re-enlist without a pay rise. New funds had to be found. Then, fire swept parts of the capital. A reluctant Augustus turned to taxation. It was a dangerous tactic, and the emperor knew it. Fearing a coup, Augustus dispersed potential enemies. He recessed the courts, and disbanded the Senate. He even dismissed his own retinue – Rome remained on edge.

Reconstruction voiceover: “The mob, distressed by the famine of the taxes after the fire...openly discussed rebellion. When night fell, they hung seditious posters.”

Narrator: The crisis passed. But soon a new and even greater disaster battered the aging Augustus. It began in Germany, a land of fiercely independent tribes, and to the Roman eye, rugged barbarism. The region had been recently conquered, and Roman customs were taking root – or so they thought.

Reconstruction voiceover: “The barbarians had not forgotten their ancient traditions, their free way of life or the power of arms. But, as long as they were assimilated slowly, they did not realize they were changing, and did not resist Roman influence.”

Narrator: That peaceful evolution stopped, however, in the year 9. The year an arrogant young General named Quinctilius Varus became commander of the Rhine army, and brought an iron fist to the province.

Reconstruction voiceover: “He forced more drastic change on the barbarians, and exacted money as if they were his subjects.”

Narrator: Varus disastrously miscalculated the extent of Roman control, and misjudged German compliance. A trusted German chieftain organized a full-scale revolt, and lured Varus’ troops into a trap, deep in unfamiliar terrain.

Reconstruction voiceover: “The mountains were rocky and covered with ravines. The trees were dense and tall so that the Romans were struggling to make progress. Rain began to fall in sheets. The heavy wind scattered their numbers. The ground became slippery around the tree trunks and leaves. While the Romans were dealing with these troubles, the barbarians surrounded them, suddenly coming from everywhere. First, they came from afar. Then, since no

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one was fighting back and many were wounded, the barbarians came ever closer, and the Romans were unable to retaliate. They kept crashing into each other...They could not grip their arrows or javelins. The rain forced their weapons from their hands. Even their sodden shields were useless. And so every man and every horse was slaughtered.”

Narrator: Three legions were massacred – a tenth of Rome’s army. Augustus, his biographer reports, was traumatized.

Reconstruction voiceover: “They say he was so disturbed, that for several months, he let his hair and beard grow, and would sometimes bash his head on doors and cry out ‘Quintilius Varus, give me back my legions.’”

Narrator: The disaster in Germany underscored a stark reality. The empire was born of violence, and to violence, it ever threatened to return. The emperor was in no mood for leniency.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Believe me, love’s climax of pleasure should not be rushed, but savored. But when you reach those places a woman loves to have touched, don’t let shame get in the way, don’t back off. You’ll see her eyes shine with a trembling light, as when the sun glitters on rippling water. She’ll moan and murmur sweet words just right for the game. But don’t outpace your mistress, or let her leave you in the dust. Rush to the finish line in unison. When man and woman collapse together, they both win. That’s the greatest prize.”

Narrator: Ovid’s sizzling words gripped Rome when they were first published. But a decade later, they would return to haunt him. For the patience of the emperor Augustus has reached its lowest point. Beleaguered, he saw plots in every corner, anarchy in every act of disobedience. Blaming the subversive book, Augustus banished Ovid from Rome.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Hello. Are you there? If so, indulge these verses of mine. They don’t come from my garden, or from that old couch I used to sprawl on. Whoever you are and in whatever parlor or bedroom or study, I have been writing on decks, propped up against bulkheads.”

Narrator: The poet was sent to an untamed backwater on the edges of the empire, on the shores of the black sea. For Ovid, the ultimate urban sophisticate, no punishment could have been harsher. His roguish aplomb crumbled to anguish.

Reconstruction voiceover: “When night falls here, I think of that other night when I was cast out into the endless gloom. We managed to laugh, once or twice,

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when my wife found, in some old trunk, odd pieces of clothing. This might be the thing this season, the new Romanian mode. And just as abruptly, our peal of laughter would catch, and tear into tears. And we held each other. My wife sobbed at the hearth. What could I say? I took the first step with which all journeys begin, but could not take the second. I was barely able to breathe. I set forth again. Behind me, she fell, rolling, onto the floor, her hair swept onto the hearth, stirring up the dust and ashes. I heard her call my name. I thought I had survived the worst – what could be worst? But my wife arose, pursued me, held on to me weeping. Servants pulled her away. Whatever worth there was in me died there.”

Narrator: Ovid was sure his talents would bring him home. He wrote constantly. And as he waited, he sought refuge in a remote frontier town. When the temperatures dropped, Ovid wrote, the wine froze in its vessels, the river in its banks. Across the ice thundered hostile horsemen, plundering and killing. It was a brutal life. Ovid wrote home from exile, a side of the empire that few Romans ever saw.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Beyond these rickety walls there’s no safety. And inside it’s hardly better. Barbarians live in most of the houses – even if you’re not afraid of them you’ll despise their long hair and clothes made of animal skins. They all do business in their common language. I have to communicate with gestures. I am understood by no one, and the stupid peasants insult my Latin words. They heckle me to my face, and mock my exile.”

Narrator: Writing for this audience, Ovid complained, was like “dancing in the dark.” As the years passed, Ovid shrivelled into a bony old man. He fell ill. Contrition replaced his former bravado.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Oh, I repent I repent. If anyone as wretched as I can be believed, I do repent. I am tortured by my deed.”

Narrator: Ovid, however, never got an answer to his pleas. And would never get a reprieve. As he approached death, he became sadly resigned to his fate.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Look at me. I yearn for my country, my home, and for you. I have lost everything that I once had. But I still have my talent. Emperors have no jurisdiction over that. My fame will survive, even after I am gone. And as long as Rome dominates the world, I will be read.”

Narrator: Nine years into his exile, Ovid died. He outlived Augustus, but he had bent to the emperor’s will. At the start of the emperor’s public life, Augustus had won the wars engulfing Rome. By the end, he had won the peace, and men like

THE ROMAN EMPIRE

IN THE FIRST CENTURY

Ovid paid the price. In the years ahead, when lesser men would rule Rome, that price would rise higher still.

Reconstruction voiceover: “Oh Jupiter and Mars and all gods that raise the Roman Empire to ruler of the world, I invoke you and I pray – guard this prosperity, this peace, now and into the future.”

Narrator: In the year 14, prayers such as these were heard around the vast dominion ruled by Rome. For in that year, the empire stood at a precipice.

Narrator: The emperor Augustus had died. Augustus had been a towering figure. He had extinguished a century of civil war. He presided over forty years of internal peace and prosperity. He forged the vision and power that cemented the empire together. But the peace of Augustus came at a price. By the end of his life, Augustus had eclipsed the Senate, ruled as a monarch, and founded a dynasty that was fraught with troubles. His heirs, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius – these men would lead Rome through years of political terror, imperial madness, assassination – and through the distant founding of a new religion that would one day engulf the empire itself. The years to come would be years of trial – testing the endurance of subjects and citizens, soldiers and slaves. The men and women of the Roman Empire in the first century.

ENDS