The year we now know as A.D. 1 was actually 753 in the Roman calendar, which began with the legendary founding of the city by Romulus and Remus. The year A.D. 1 also marked the twenty-seventh year in the reign of Rome's first emperor, Augustus. While the forum bearing his name had been completed two years earlier, the city's most famous monuments—the Pantheon, Trajan's Forum, the Colosseum, and the arches of Titus, Septimius Severus, and Constantine—had yet to be built. These would be constructed by later emperors over the course of more than three centuries.

**A.D. 64 Nero Fiddles while Rome Burns.** One of the best surviving descriptions of early Rome can be found in Tacitus' (ca. A.D. 56-117) Annals of Imperial Rome, wherein the historian tells of the devastating fire of July 19, A.D. 64, and the subsequent rebuilding of the city:

*Now started the most terrible and destructive fire which Rome had ever experienced. It began in the Circus, where it adjoins the Palatine and Caelian hills. ...Fanned by the wind, the conflagration instantly grew and swept the full length of the Circus. There were no walled mansions or temples, or any other obstructions which could arrest it. First, the fire swept violently over the level spaces. Then it climbed the hills—but returned to ravage the lower ground again. It outstripped every counter measure.*

*Nero was in Antium. He only returned to the city when the fire was approaching the mansion he had built to link the gardens of Maecenus to the Palatine. ...A rumor had spread that, while the city was burning, Nero had gone on his private stage and, comparing modern calamities with ancient, had sung of the destruction of Troy. ...People believed that Nero was ambitious to found a new city to be called after himself.*

*Of Rome's 14 districts only four remained intact. Three were leveled to the ground. The other seven were reduced to a few scorched and mangled ruins. To count the mansions, blocks, and temples destroyed would be difficult. They included shrines of remote antiquity, such as Servius Tillius' temple of the Moon, the Great Altar and holy place dedicated by Evander to Hercules, the temple vowed by Romulus to Jupiter the Stayer, Numa's sacred residence, and Vesta's shrine containing Rome's household gods. Among the losses, too, were the precious spoils of countless victories, Greek artistic masterpieces, and authentic records of old Roman genius.*
But Nero profited by his country's ruin to build a new palace. Its wonders were not so much customary and commonplace luxuries like gold and jewels, but lawns and lakes and faked rusticity—woods here, open spaces and views there. With their cunning, impudent artificialities, Nero's architects and engineers, Severus and Celer, did not balk at effects which Nature herself had ruled out as impossible.

In parts of Rome unfilled by Nero's palace, construction was not...without plan or demarcation. Street fronts were of regulated alignment, streets were broad, and houses built around courtyards. Their height was restricted, and their frontages protected by colonnades. Nero undertook to erect these at his own expense....

These measures were welcomed for their practicality, and they beautified the new city. Some, however, believed that the old town's configuration had been healthier, since its narrow streets and high houses had provided protection against the burning sun, whereas now the shadowless open spaces radiated a fiercer heat.

Rome prospered throughout the first and second centuries A.D., reaching its apogee under the Antonines (A.D. 138-193). However, revolts in the provinces, the outbreak of plague, and increasing national debt, which in turn brought increased taxes and decreased services, began to take their toll.

A.D. 286 An Empire Divided. Diocletian split the Empire between east and west, a move he believed would help Rome protect herself from invasion by northern tribes. As the Eastern Empire prospered it became increasingly independent. By the end of the third century Rome had lost control of its eastern provinces, which were coming under the sway of Christianity.

A.D. 312 Dream of Constantine. Following his accession to the throne on October 28, A.D. 312, Constantine saw the toleration and eventual adoption of Christianity as key to the reunification of the Empire. Though he moved his capital to Constantinople, which did little to increase Rome's prosperity, the eastern city never rivaled its western counterpart in political importance. Monuments to the new-found faith began to displace their pagan counterparts.

(Illustration by Eric Fulford)
A.D. 410 Imperial Rome Falls to Ruin. Alaric I, chief of the Visigoths, sacked Rome, marking the beginning of the end of the Western Empire. In the centuries that followed, Rome was ruled by a succession of foreign kings—Vandals, Longobards, Saracens, and Normans.

Who could believe that Rome, which was built of the spoils of the whole earth, would fall, that the city could at the same time be the cradle and grave of her people.--St. Jerome, A.D. 410

For centuries Rome had prospered by feeding on the plunder of others. To survive in the wake of conquest the eternal city had begun feeding on herself. Every building--its columns, facing stones, mosaic floors, or mortar--reflects the pillage of older Roman monuments.

Public buildings, in which all the ornament of the city consisted have been destroyed with the criminal permission of the authorities on the pretext that materials were needed for public works. The splendid structures of ancient buildings have been overthrown, and the great has been everywhere destroyed to erect the little.--Majorian, A.D. 458

A.D. 1000 The Unknown City. By the Middle Ages the skyline of the imperial city had vanished, replaced by a cacophony of church towers and fallen pediments. Most of Rome's ancient structures lay buried beneath a thick layer of earth--pasture for grazing flocks. Those that remained above ground had been incorporated into Christian churches and city walls, or had their stone mined for new buildings or burned for lime. According to Princeton University historian Anthony Grafton, it was impossible to identify where exactly the great dramas of Roman history had been played out. The traditional guidebook, the *Mirabilia urbis Romae*, composed around the middle of the twelfth century, identifies the Colosseum as a temple of the sun and the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius as the image of a peasant who had saved Rome from the depredations of an invader. The guidebook explains the great thermae (baths) of the emperors not as places where Romans had gone to wash and sweat, but as palaces with large underground chambers that were heated in the winter and filled with cooling water in the summer. Moreover, many of the buildings included in the volume are described as once having been covered in glass and gold and adorned with precious stones. "In short," says Grafton, "travelers who used this text as their Baedeker would leave Rome not knowing where Caesar died or Nero fiddled."

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