

# Rome and Imperialism

## Rome in the history of imperialism

Rome has long occupied a central place in the theorisation of empire. One reason is that imperial symbols and language – eagles, fasces, laurel wreaths, and the Latin titlature of empire – have been repeatedly appropriated in the Western tradition by expanding powers and states. The Frankish King Charlemagne had himself crowned emperor by the Pope in Rome in 800. The title *Kaisar* (Caesar) was used by the rulers of successive German emperors in the Middle Ages, and Czar by various Eastern European powers up to and including the rulers of Russia. Medieval appropriations related as much to the contemporary presence of the emperors of Byzantium (who continued to be Caesars and to rule a Roman Empire into the 15th century) as to any close connection with earlier periods. But the increased interest in the classical past across Europe from the early modern period meant that Rome was repeatedly a mode. After the French Revolution and Napoleon's abolition of the Holy Roman (German) Empire, Roman titlature was adopted by French, Austrian, and British rulers. Many titles and symbols of Roman origin remained current until the middle of the 20th century.

That reception history has been a mixed blessing for the study of ancient Rome (Harrison 2008). While it has meant that Rome has received much closer attention than many other early empires – such as Achaemenid Persia, the Hellenistic kingdoms of the Abbasid Caliphate – the repeated comparisons have introduced many anachronisms. Among these have been debates over the economic motors and costs of Roman imperialism, and over its civilising or brutalising effects. To some extent this remains the case in contemporary comparisons between Rome and America and even with post-colonial interpretations of ancient Rome, which sometimes seem tinged with post-colonial guilt. The best comparisons have in fact repeatedly drawn out contrasts between ancient Roman and modern European imperialism, and exposed the ideological component of claims to the contrary (Brunt 1965; Malamud 2009). It has even been suggested that we should not employ the term 'imperialism' to describe Roman

expansion, so as to avoid importing connotations of competing hegemonies led by modernising nation states (Veyne 1975): those who follow Lenin's notion of imperialism as a distinct stage of capitalism (1934) would also have to reject the label as it applied to Rome.

In practice it is not feasible to dispense with the labels 'empire' and 'imperialism', as similar problems face any alternative terminology. The most thoughtful recent approaches treat Rome as one of number of similar political entities often termed early empires. Depending on the focus of the analysis these are often qualified as tributary empires (in relation to their political economy) or pre-capitalist or pre-industrial if their economic life or technology seems more important. Broadly similar to Rome would be the sequence of Chinese empires that began in 221 BCE with the creation of the Qin dynasty, a series of empires based on the Iranian plateau including those of the Achaemenid, Parthian, and Sassanian dynasties, probably the Neo-Assyrian Empire that controlled Mesopotamia and surrounding states in the first half of the last millennium BCE, a series of empires based on the Indo-Gangetic plain beginning with the Maurya dynasty of 322–185 BCE, the larger Macedonian-ruled kingdoms that divided the territory of the former Achaemenid Empire in roughly the same period, and a series of much later New World empires including those of the Aztec and the Inka. Each of these represented a system of political domination created by one people through the conquest and intimidation of a number of other peoples and often by the absorption of a number of earlier states. Typically they were sustained by exactions of labour (military and other), of agricultural produce, and of metals, and typically much of this was spent on rewarding various privileged populations or classes and supporting military forces. Most of these entities invested in infrastructure – roads, canals, fortifications, storehouses, and ports – and in ceremonial and monuments. Almost all were ruled by autocrats. Most (with the exception of the New World examples) had iron metallurgy; most used writing and had imperial systems of weights and measures. None had any source of energy beyond human and animal labour, and none had any system of communications faster than a sailing vessel or a relay of riders or runners could provide.

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1 There is disagreement on the most appropriate boundaries of this analytical category.  
2 Some scholars would include some of the  
3 earlier and generally smaller expansionist  
4 states of the Bronze Age Near East, including  
5 New Kingdom Egypt, and analogous  
6 states in Central and South America like that  
7 of Wari, and some would include the short-  
8 lived hegemony exercised by powerful city  
9 states over their neighbours in city state civilisations  
10 (see Hansen 2000, 2002). Whether  
11 medieval and early modern empires were  
12 essentially similar is also debated. A number  
13 of recent synoptic studies deal with these  
14 questions (Alcock et al. 2001; Bang and Bayly  
15 2003, 2011; Morris and Scheidel 2009). Some  
16 of these draw on historical sociologies of  
17 empire (Doyle 1986; Eisenstadt 1963; Hardt  
18 and Negri 2000; Kautsky 1982). Despite these  
19 disagreements over the proper limits of comparison,  
20 consideration of at least some other  
21 early empires provides a useful perspective on  
22 Roman imperialism. In particular, comparative  
23 analysis often reveals what was unique  
24 or unusual in the solutions Romans adopted  
25 to problems that were widely faced by early  
26 imperial powers, such as peripheral revolts,  
27 the integration of minorities, or the formidable  
28 limitations on long-distance communications  
29 before the industrial revolution.  
30

### The phases of Roman expansion

31  
32  
33  
34 The full story of the growth, stabilisation,  
35 and collapse of Roman political domination  
36 can only be sketched out here (see  
37 Champion 2004; Nicolet 1977; Woolf 2012).  
38 Roman tradition dated the foundation of the  
39 city to the middle of the eighth century BCE,  
40 and archaeological research suggests that  
41 the site of Rome was at least occupied by that  
42 point. The institutions of a city state emerged  
43 around the seventh and sixth centuries BCE,  
44 probably a little later than in Etruria (Tuscany)  
45 just to the north or in the areas to the south  
46 where Greek cities were created. During the  
47 first half of the last millennium BCE, urban  
48 settlements and archaic states were created  
49 all around the Mediterranean and Black Seas.  
50 By the fifth century BCE some larger states –  
51 Athens, Sparta, Syracuse, and Carthage are  
52 the most famous – were coming to dominate  
53 their neighbours. Rome was not in quite the  
54 same league as these powers, but was probably  
55 already expanding at the expense of its  
56

immediate neighbours. During the fourth  
century BCE Rome first defeated the largest  
of the cities of southern Etruria, Veii,  
and then extended its control over its Latin-  
speaking neighbours and the hill tribes of  
central Italy. Wars fought almost every year,  
supported by contingents from its defeated  
'allies', extended a hegemony over most of  
Italy south of the Apennines, although this  
was not expressed in regular extraction of  
tribute, and most of the cities and people  
of the peninsula remained autonomous even  
if they had lost effective control of their foreign  
relations. A demonstration of the resilience  
of Roman control came in 280–275 BCE  
when Tarentum, one of the largest Greek cities  
of southern Italy, persuaded Pyrrhus, King  
of Epirus, to cross the Adriatic and challenge  
Rome. Although successful in several battles,  
Pyrrhus was unable to establish a power base,  
and his retreat in effect solidified Roman control  
of Italy. This was also the period in which  
Greek writers noticed the rise of Rome, and  
from this point on a more precise and accurate  
kind of history can be written.

The Mediterranean world in the third and  
second centuries BCE was dominated by a  
small number of political hegemonies. In  
the east the Achaemenid Empire conquered  
by Alexander the Great had been divided  
between three large kingdoms – Seleukid  
Syria, Ptolemaic Egypt, and Antigonid  
Macedon – and a number of smaller states  
that aspired to the same status, among  
them the kingdoms of Bithynia, Pontus, and  
Pergamum in Asia Minor and that of Epirus  
in the Balkans. Between and around them were  
cities, leagues of cities, and tribal peoples like  
the Thracians, variously allies, suppliers of  
mercenaries, and victims of the wars between  
the Great Powers. Some cities, like Cyrene,  
Corinth, Athens, and Rhodes, were larger  
players than others. West of the Adriatic  
Rome had only one serious rival, the city of  
Carthage close to modern Tunis, which exercised  
a loose control over other Phoenician  
foundations in north Africa, western Sicily  
and southern Spain. Sardinia and Corsica,  
the remainder of Mediterranean Spain, and  
most of southern France outside the small  
area controlled by the Greek city of Marseilles  
and her colonies were settled by tribal peoples  
with little resembling cities or states. By  
the middle of the second century BCE Rome  
had established effective hegemony over the  
entirety of these regions.

1 A series of wars with Carthage (the Punic  
 2 Wars) in 264–241 BCE, 218–201 BCE, and  
 3 149–146 BCE gave Rome control of the west-  
 4 ern Mediterranean. The first Punic war was  
 5 fought largely over Sicily and resulted in  
 6 Rome becoming a naval power, as well as  
 7 the creation of the first overseas provinces  
 8 in Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica. The second  
 9 Punic war saw Hannibal cross the Alps but  
 10 then be driven out of Italy, and Rome assert  
 11 control over the entirety of Mediterranean  
 12 Spain. Carthage was destroyed in 146 BCE  
 13 and Rome established a foothold in north  
 14 Africa; the Macedonian kingdom was  
 15 defeated in 197 BCE and the Syrian king-  
 16 dom in 188 BCE. Rome did not immediately  
 17 annex any territory east of the Adriatic, and  
 18 to begin with seemed content to extract plun-  
 19 der, disrupt local hegemonies, and leave the  
 20 region in the control of its allies. This proved  
 21 unsustainable or at least unstable. Macedon  
 22 was again defeated in 168 BCE and the king-  
 23 dom was abolished, to be replaced with four  
 24 city states. Rome soon fell out with most of  
 25 its east Mediterranean allies. The last king  
 26 of Pergamum left his kingdom to Rome in  
 27 his will, and so by the end of the second  
 28 century Rome had provinces in the Balkans  
 29 and western Asia Minor, had obliterated the  
 30 ancient city of Corinth as an example of what  
 31 happened to defiant allies, and seemed to  
 32 contemporary observers like the Greek his-  
 33 torian Polybius to be the undisputed ruler of  
 34 the civilised world. Rome had not, however,  
 35 developed very efficient institutions of control  
 36 and relied on public contractors to extract rev-  
 37 enue, basing no troops and very few officials  
 38 in the east, and expecting both conquered  
 39 territories and other powers (like Egypt) to  
 40 accept orders from Roman envoys. When  
 41 Mithradates, King of Pontus, invaded first the  
 42 Roman province of Asia and then southern  
 43 Greece he was able to exploit Rome's unpop-  
 44 ularity, and Rome briefly lost control of all her  
 45 possessions east of the Adriatic. That crisis  
 46 coincided with a major rebellion by most of  
 47 Rome's Italian allies. The first half of the last  
 48 century BCE was largely spent re-establishing  
 49 Roman control (Morstein Kallet-Marx 1995).

50 The instruments through which the  
 51 Roman Republic took its empire in hand  
 52 included armies serving for long peri-  
 53 ods overseas, the beginnings of a tributary  
 54 structure, and the concentration of power  
 55 into the hands of a small number of gener-  
 56 als. Some of these were successful in using

that power to extend Roman control well  
 beyond the Mediterranean littoral. Between  
 67 and 62 BCE Pompey first co-ordinated a  
 Mediterranean-wide elimination of piracy  
 and then campaigned throughout the Near  
 East: his armies reached the Caspian and in  
 Mesopotamia the boundaries of the Parthian  
 (Persian) Empire. Between 58 and 52 BCE  
 Julius Caesar took control of all non-Med-  
 iterranean France, campaigning up to and  
 beyond the English Channel and the Rhine.  
 Civil wars, drawing on the same resources  
 as conquest, interrupted campaigns but  
 also fuelled the competition for glory and  
 booty and led to the acquisition of new terri-  
 tory, most notably Egypt in 30 BCE. Caesar's  
 great-nephew Augustus, the first emperor  
 of Rome, masterminded campaigns that  
 between 15 BCE and 9 CE extended Roman  
 control to the Rhine and Danube. Other cam-  
 paigns took place in Armenia, Spain, Africa,  
 and Arabia. On Augustus's death in 14 CE  
 the entire Mediterranean basin and much  
 of its hinterlands were controlled either by  
 provinces or through client kings. Some of  
 those kingdoms were converted into provin-  
 ces in the course of the first century CE.  
 Wars of conquest in Britain began in 43 CE,  
 continuing sporadically but never taking per-  
 manent control of more than the lowlands of  
 Scotland. The German frontier was advanced  
 from the Rhine to the Neckar at the end of  
 the first century AD, and most of modern  
 Romania (Roman Dacia) was conquered soon  
 after.

The early second century CE marked the  
 high-water mark of Roman power. A series of  
 attempts to conquer Mesopotamia (modern  
 Iraq) were made, and there were successful  
 campaigns on several occasions through to  
 the end of the fourth century, but a permanent  
 presence was never established. From the last  
 second century CE the empire came under  
 more pressure. A 50-year period of chaos in  
 the third century was marked by invasions,  
 rebellions, a short-lived fragmentation, and  
 an exceptionally rapid turnover of empires.  
 The empire survived but lost the most recently  
 conquered territories on the northern fron-  
 tier. At the end of the fourth century large  
 numbers of Goths crossed the Danube, and  
 they were followed in the next two genera-  
 tions by more tribes, some coming across  
 the Rhine. Control over first Britain and then  
 northern Gaul was lost during the fifth cen-  
 tury, and Spain and Africa followed. By the

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sixth century all territories west of the Adriatic were controlled by Germanic kingdoms, some making use of Roman institutions and bureaucrats. An attempt by the eastern emperor, now based in Constantinople, to reconquer parts of the west later in the century met with limited success. Meanwhile Roman frontiers in the east were under intermittent pressure from the Persians. Around the middle of the sixth century, while eastern Roman armies were campaigning in Italy, the Persians sacked Antioch in Syria. Fresh invasions of Italy and the Balkans from the north followed, and in the early seventh century Rome lost Jerusalem and Egypt to Persia. The Persians did not enjoy their control of the Near East for long. In 636 Arab armies defeated the Romans at the battle of Yarmuk, but by 651 they had destroyed the Persian Empire and by 711 they had conquered all of north Africa and invaded Visigothic Spain. Byzantium survived as a micro-empire surrounding the Aegean Sea.

The key stages of Roman expansion may be summarised as follows:

1. c.500–275 BCE: Slow incremental extension of power within Italian peninsula.
2. 275–73 BCE: Progressive elimination of rival hegemonies within the Mediterranean basin.
3. 73 BCE–9 CE: Period of accelerating expansion including conquest of half of temperate Europe, Egypt, and most of the Near East.
4. 9–132 CE: Period of general consolidation with limited conquests and the absorption of client states into provinces.
5. 132–378 CE: Period of pressure largely survived with only some territorial losses.
6. 378–717 CE: Period of accelerating contraction.

The first part of this pattern closely resembles a trajectory followed by some other empires. The rise of Qin during the Warring States period was slow until the last generation, when it accelerated rapidly and then stopped in a moment of institutional consolidation that laid the foundations for Han China. The creation of the Achaemenid Empire too began with a slow rise to power of the Medes and Persians followed by the rapid conquest of Assyrian, Babylonian, Egyptian, and Lydian kingdoms and a period of institutionalisation under Darius. The Inka created their empire

in less than a century, again by absorbing a series of well-established polities and connecting them up with a new infrastructure. Historical sociologists sometimes describe this as a shift from ‘conquest state’ to ‘tributary empire’: that is, a set of institutions based on and supporting expansion came to be replaced – often after a crisis – with a new set of institutions invested in sustainable dominion. The current scholarly focus is on the expansion-bearing structures of the Republican period, and for the Principate on the means by which consent was secured from the empire’s subjects. These emphases have largely replaced approaches that sought to understand the reasons for Roman expansion in the Republic and for Roman ‘stagnation’ under the emperors, in terms of the motivations of leading political actors, and/or else in terms of institutional or cultural exceptionalism. Those earlier approaches reflected ancient understandings of the rise of Rome.

#### Ancient understandings

Ancient explanations of the rise of Rome tended to invoke the virtue and piety of the Romans, the excellence of their civic institutions, and the favour of the gods (Ferrary 1988; North 1993). So Ennius, the great epic poet of the second century BCE, wrote in *Annals* (a fragment cited in Cicero, *Republic* 5.1), ‘*Moribus antiquis res stat Romana virisque*’ (‘The Roman state depends on ancient customs and on its men’ – or ‘... on its manhood’, since virtue and manliness are denoted by the same word in Latin). This tended to be understood in terms of the cumulative virtue of individual Romans, especially of members of the propertied classes who supplied civil magistrates, priests, and generals. The first emperor, Augustus, represented this tradition when he filled the forum built around the temple of Mars Ultor (Mars the Avenger) with more than 100 images of *summi viri*, great Romans of the past who had extended the power (*imperium*) of the Roman people. Each statue was accompanied by a label that listed the individual’s magistracies and priesthoods and the victories he had achieved. Alongside these were statues of the founders of Rome, Romulus and Aeneas, of the divine ancestors of the Romans and of Augustus’ family, and of Augustus himself (Geiger 2008). A separate monument in the forum Romanum bore lists (*fasti*) that named

1 all the Romans who had held the supreme  
2 magistracy – the consulship – and separately  
3 all those who had ever celebrated a triumph.  
4 Public monuments of this kind picked up a  
5 much older tradition. The family tomb of the  
6 Scipiones on the via Appia includes a series  
7 of sarcophagi with labels that for each promi-  
8 nent member of the family list their great-  
9 est (generally military) achievements. The  
10 announcements that Augustus made at the  
11 inauguration of his forum and the temple of  
12 Mars Ultor proclaimed that the deeds of the  
13 greatest Romans of the past would be a model  
14 for him and his successors to follow: young  
15 male members of the aristocracy underwent  
16 many of their rites of passage against the  
17 backdrop of these monuments.

18 The relationship between the Romans and  
19 their gods was thought of more collectively.  
20 Prodigies and omens were reported to the  
21 senate; colleges of senatorial priests were  
22 charged with devising and carrying out ritu-  
23 als to ensure the gods remained supportive;  
24 wars had to be declared according to particu-  
25 lar rituals; generals consulted the heavens  
26 before going to war, made battlefield vows  
27 for success, and on their return set up tem-  
28 ples to the gods concerned to acknowledge  
29 their help. The ever-evolving ceremony of the  
30 triumph brought the entire city together in a  
31 collective restoration of the peaceful order  
32 and a display of honour shared by the aristo-  
33 cratic general, the citizen army, and the gods  
34 themselves (Beard 2007; Östenberg 2009).  
35 Yet even in these collective ceremonies, indi-  
36 viduals asserted themselves. Successful gen-  
37 erals added the names of defeated peoples or  
38 places to their own, both in ordinary usage  
39 and on monuments (so Fabius Maximus  
40 Allobrogicus after the Allobroges he defeated  
41 in the middle Rhône valley, and Publius  
42 Cornelius Scipio Africanus for his victories  
43 in the Punic Wars). The streets of Republican  
44 Rome came to be lined with victory temples,  
45 often fulfilling vows made on the battlefield  
46 by generals who paid for them from their  
47 share of the booty, and were eventually deco-  
48 rated with art works that commemorated  
49 the triumphs of the Roman people (Holliday  
50 2002). Temples of this kind were often main-  
51 tained by the aristocratic descendants of the  
52 dedicator, and at noble funerals distinguished  
53 ancestors were animated by actors who wore  
54 effigies of the dead and robes appropriate to  
55 their status, while the military exploits of the  
56 deceased were rehearsed in speeches.

More generally, warfare was a central loca-  
tion for building fame. Wars lay at the centre  
of the epic poetry of Ennius and his predeces-  
sors, and then of Latin historiography. When  
Ennius's patron Fulvius Nobilior returned  
in triumph from campaigns in the Balkans,  
he created a great temple and precinct where  
plundered statuary was displayed, and spon-  
sored a play about his victories. Individual  
achievements and the interests of the Roman  
people were repeatedly elided. Conversely  
when things went wrong it was often the  
result of inadequate ritual preparation on  
the part of the generals, or occasionally of  
other members of the senatorial order: a  
Vestal Virgin who broke her vow of chas-  
tity was sometime identified and punished  
with death. During the civil wars of the late  
Republic some orators and historians began  
to blame military and civil disasters on a gen-  
eral falling away of moral standards, the cor-  
rupting effects of luxury, contamination by  
alien values, and the like (Lintott 1972).

Institutional explanations for the rise of  
Rome were produced in parallel to these  
internal moralising debates. The Greek his-  
torian Polybius, who spent much of his adult  
life in Rome as an honoured hostage, attrib-  
uted Roman success to what we would term  
the comparative advantage of its institutions.  
The Roman political system was a judicious  
blend of monarchical, aristocratic, and dem-  
ocratic elements, and its military and reli-  
gious institutions were superior to those of  
its rivals. The concepts Polybius employed  
were derived ultimately from the political phi-  
losophy of Aristotle and Plato, but they were  
not felt to be in conflict with native Roman  
ideas about the importance of virtue. Greek  
thinkers did not see political institutions in  
the way Hobbes did as a remedy for the bru-  
talities of the state of nature, but rather as  
means of establishing ways of life in which  
humans naturally reached their full poten-  
tial. Although often ascribed to Aristotle, this  
idea was traditional: Xenophon had ascribed  
Spartan success to the perfection of its insti-  
tutions and the habits they inculcated, and  
so it was natural for Polybius to move from  
the Roman constitution to Roman conduct.  
At least some of his Roman contemporar-  
ies would have agreed, even if others might  
have stressed the particular favour the gods  
showed to peoples of particular piety. Roman  
leaders were, on the whole, careful to estab-  
lish that their wars were justified, both to

1 ensure divine favour and to win the support  
2 of the popular assemblies that voted on war  
3 and peace. But these justifications, achieved  
4 by rhetoric and ritual, were focused on indi-  
5 vidual conflicts. Only in the last generation  
6 of the Republic did the notion emerge that  
7 Romans had a general mandate to conquer  
8 the world and rule it well (Brunt 1978; Ferrary  
9 1988).

10 Ancient writers spent much less time try-  
11 ing to explain why Romans fought so many  
12 wars. One reason is that most ancient states  
13 were both warlike and engaged in sporadic  
14 disputes with their neighbours. City states  
15 generally fielded citizen armies, and military  
16 training was often a key part of the process by  
17 which young men became full citizens. Tribal  
18 communities seem also to have embraced  
19 a warrior ethos, to judge from grave goods  
20 and art works like Situla-Art of the Alps or  
21 the Gundestrup cauldron from Denmark.  
22 The question was not so much why cities  
23 and peoples came to blows, but rather why  
24 some did so more successfully than others.  
25 Thucydides had dramatised a debate on this  
26 theme between the Athenians and the Melians  
27 in the second book of his *Peloponnesian War*:  
28 the Athenians refuse to spare the Melians,  
29 on the ground that the strong always do  
30 what they can and the weak suffer what they  
31 must. A Roman legend told how when the  
32 Gauls were extracting indemnities from the  
33 Romans they were caught using false meas-  
34 ures to weigh out gold. When challenged a  
35 Gallic chief pressed down the scale with his  
36 sword exclaiming, 'Vae victis!' ('Woe to the  
37 vanquished!'; Livy, *History of Rome* 5.48.9). War  
38 was a normal state of affairs, and what was  
39 special about the Romans was not that they  
40 fought wars, but that they were so successful  
41 at doing so.

### 42 Explaining expansion

43 The modern debate over the origins of  
44 Republican imperialism has taken a more  
45 tortuous route than that followed by ancient  
46 explanations. On the basis of the Roman  
47 notion that only just wars received divine sup-  
48 port and on Roman accounts of the origins  
49 of several conflicts, it was for a while argued  
50 that Rome expanded accidentally, along the  
51 lines of Sir John Robert Seeley's quip that  
52 the British 'conquered and peopled half  
53 the world in a fit of absence of mind' (1914:  
54 10). Romans, according to some, practised

'defensive imperialism', responding only  
to external threats and finding themselves  
rather surprisingly in command of the world  
as a result. Support for this view was found in  
the supposed slowness of Romans to convert  
victories in the east into territorial provinces  
or to assume the imperial responsibilities to  
which their military success seemed to entitle  
them.

That view was comprehensively demol-  
ished by the demonstration that Romans con-  
sistently displayed attitudes that supported  
warfare, celebrated victory, and rewarded  
successful generals (Harris 1979, 1984).  
Among the institutions that cohered well  
with expansion were the practice of requiring  
defeated peoples to supply troops for further  
campaigns (Gabba 1976); the ritual of the  
triumph that marked the end of a success-  
ful war (Beard 2007); and a series of devices  
for expanding the citizen body, and so the  
citizen army (Raaflaub 1996). Warfare was  
not an absolute constant: there were periods  
of greater and less mobilisation. If Roman  
warfare was not primarily defensive there  
were certainly some wars that Rome did not  
choose, as when the King of Pontus invaded  
Rome's eastern provinces in the early last cen-  
tury BCE or when migrations penetrated the  
Mediterranean world from temperate Europe  
(Rich 1993). But in general it is fair to charac-  
terise the Roman Republic as a society geared  
for war, and in some respects dependent on  
warfare to satisfy the demands of its aristoc-  
racy and people for glory and booty.

That gearing naturally encompassed eco-  
nomic activity of various kinds. Rome had  
no independent mercantile class that might  
lobby for annexation. Indeed annexation  
reduced some opportunities for profiteer-  
ing, as in the case of the slave trade (enslave-  
ment was in principle illegal within the  
empire), and because provincials had from  
the middle of the second century BCE some  
recourse to Roman justice that those outside  
the empire did not. There were no ancient  
equivalents of the chartered joint-stock com-  
panies that played such prominent parts in  
British, Dutch, and other European imperial-  
isms from the 17th century on. Corporations  
had very little place in Roman law, the clos-  
est equivalent being short-lived *societates*  
– partnerships – which tendered for public  
contracts. The economic basis of pre-capital-  
ist and capitalist imperialism was naturally  
very different.

1 All the same most sectors of Roman society  
 2 benefited from expansion, directly or indi-  
 3 rectly. Successful generals brought back great  
 4 amounts of booty, and their personal share  
 5 of it was not limited to what was spent on  
 6 the gods or on triumphal feasts and games.  
 7 Citizen soldiers and allies alike also received  
 8 shares of the booty. The proceeds of con-  
 9 quest were spread more widely. The defeat  
 10 of Macedon in 168 BCE was followed by the  
 11 abandonment of direct taxation of Roman  
 12 citizens in Italy. The sacks of Carthage and  
 13 Corinth in 146 BCE were followed by a great  
 14 aqueduct-building project, and monuments  
 15 were set up in Italian allied cities as well as  
 16 in Rome. Public building did not only ben-  
 17 efit citizens by creating a more splendid built  
 18 environment and sponsoring festivals within  
 19 it. Army supply, the extraction of revenue, and  
 20 its expenditure in building projects all came  
 21 to rely on public contracts, generally issued  
 22 by the censors in Rome. These contracts  
 23 included the construction of public basilicas,  
 24 paved forums, and roads, in Roman colonies  
 25 as well as in the city itself. Only citizens  
 26 could take public contracts, and in principle  
 27 senators were forbidden to be principals. But  
 28 great amounts of property were needed to  
 29 guarantee larger contracts, and it is clear that  
 30 behind the main contractors (*publicani*), who  
 31 were often members of Rome's junior aristoc-  
 32 racy, the equestrian order, there were senator-  
 33 ial backers. Polybius claimed in his *Histories*  
 34 (6.17) that as early as the first half of the  
 35 second century BCE 'everyone' in Rome was  
 36 involved. For a brief period in the last century  
 37 BCE, when some contracts were very large,  
 38 especially that for gathering the taxes of Asia,  
 39 these bids and their five-yearly renewals did  
 40 have political ramifications. But in general the  
 41 propertied classes all benefited from empire.

42 Provincial populations bore the brunt.  
 43 During the last century BCE in particular  
 44 Roman power was exercised at the expense  
 45 of provincial populations in many ways.  
 46 Through plunder and purchase, the wealthy  
 47 extracted cultural products from the Greek  
 48 world – books and educated slaves as well  
 49 as bronze and marble statuary and crafts-  
 50 men. Caesar's campaigns in Gaul removed so  
 51 much bullion from the region that silver and  
 52 gold coinages were effectively extinguished  
 53 north of the Alps. Large sums of money were  
 54 occasionally lent to provincials at extortion-  
 55 ate rates of interest, in the knowledge that  
 56 the governors would allow the creditors to use

Roman soldiers to recover what they were  
 owed if borrowers defaulted. All this paid for  
 grand villas and town houses, and also the  
 bribery of electors and jurors. Verres, prose-  
 cuted by Cicero for corruption while governor  
 of Sicily, was quoted as saying that he needed  
 to extract three fortunes from his province,  
 one to repay those who had elected him,  
 another to bribe those who would try him on  
 his return, and a third for himself (Cicero,  
*Against Verres* 1.1.40). Cicero's speeches allude  
 to many other corruption trials, and a series  
 of laws were passed from 149 BCE onwards  
 aimed at recovering money embezzled by  
 governors. Stories of violence and torture  
 also circulated, and the cruelty and greed  
 of Roman officials and tax-farmers form  
 a regular part of the explanations offered  
 in this period for revolts and anti-Roman  
 movements. At the beginning of his *Annales*,  
 Tacitus wrote that the provinces were unper-  
 turbed by the fall of the Republic because they  
 had suffered so much from the feuding gen-  
 erals and corrupt officials and had no faith in  
 legal redress in Rome (Levick 1994).

One other group which seems to have lost  
 out in the process was the free peasantry  
 of Italy, some at least of whom found their  
 small holdings swallowed up by large estates,  
 worked in part by slaves. The absence of  
 peasants on long campaigns and the enrich-  
 ment of the generals that led them have been  
 seen to be contributory factors, but the scale  
 and timing of these changes are disputed  
 (Hopkins 1978; Rosenstein 2004). Slaves  
 never completely replaced free peasants, who  
 still played a part in the agricultural regimes  
 of Italy during the principate, and few sub-  
 scribe to the thesis that imperial expansion  
 was driven by the demands of a 'Slave Mode  
 of Production' (Rathbone 1983).

It is unsurprising, of course, that Rome in  
 its expansionist phases had the institutions  
 and ideologies that cohered with expansion  
 (North 1981). But it is less obvious that those  
 institutions and ideologies actually explain  
 expansion as Polybius argued. A full expla-  
 nation in terms of comparative advantage  
 would have to look at Rome's rivals – Veii,  
 Carthage, Macedon, and so on – and assess  
 differences in institutions and how they fitted  
 with differences in success or policy objec-  
 tives. Multi-state analysis of this kind, mak-  
 ing use of political theory, has only just begun  
 (Eckstein 2006, 2007). Besides, Roman insti-  
 tutions and ideas were in constant flux. Most

1 importantly, innovations often seem to have  
 2 been reactions to expansion, not preparations  
 3 for it. Broadening access to citizenship came  
 4 in practice as response to a series of crises in  
 5 Rome's relations with her allies. The balance  
 6 of power between magistrates and civil insti-  
 7 tutions that Polybius praised had in fact to  
 8 shift over time as generals served further and  
 9 further away from Rome and for longer peri-  
 10 ods. Perhaps the best illustration is provided  
 11 by recent studies of the language of Roman  
 12 imperialism (Richardson 2008). Romans  
 13 developed territorial senses of *provincia* and  
 14 *imperium* only in the last century BCE, long  
 15 after they had *de facto* acquired first foreign  
 16 possessions and then an identifiable sphere  
 17 under permanent control. The same time  
 18 lag is evident in the development of provin-  
 19 cial taxation, in the elaboration of the role of  
 20 governor from simply a military commander  
 21 to a judicial official and plenipotentiary rep-  
 22 resentative of Rome in the provinces, and in  
 23 the gradual shift from annual citizen levies to  
 24 what were in effect professional armies that  
 25 might serve for years on end and needed  
 26 to be re-integrated into society when they  
 27 were disbanded. In each case these changes  
 28 responded to expansion rather than being  
 29 designed to facilitate it.

30 The period of fastest expansion was partly  
 31 driven by the failure of annual campaigns  
 32 around the Mediterranean basin to stabilise  
 33 Roman hegemony. The victories of the sec-  
 34 ond century were followed by the return and  
 35 disbanding of Roman armies. No garrisons  
 36 and no administrations were left behind.  
 37 A system of military commands that ema-  
 38 nated from a competitive political system  
 39 meant that even when there were a num-  
 40 ber of armies and generals in the field at the  
 41 same time there was no guarantee that they  
 42 would co-operate. Rome depended for infor-  
 43 mation on embassies sent by her allies, who  
 44 were often rivals. Much of the history of the  
 45 second century BCE seems to have been  
 46 driven by competition in the periphery, and  
 47 when that became engaged with factional-  
 48 ism in the centre the effects could be very  
 49 disruptive. Finally, there were some intrinsic  
 50 difficulties facing any power that wished to  
 51 control the Mediterranean world. One was a  
 52 high incidence of piracy and banditry, which  
 53 thrived in periods of political fragmentation:  
 54 Hellenistic kingdoms had struggled to main-  
 55 tain some order and their defeat by Rome  
 56 made the situation worse. A second problem

was ecological in origin: strong economic  
 and demographic ties existed between the  
 societies of the Mediterranean littoral and  
 those of its mountainous hinterlands. This  
 meant that it was in practice impossible to  
 control what is now Aegean Turkey without  
 exercising influence over the Anatolian pla-  
 teau; that Provence and could be governed if  
 only the populations of the middle and upper  
 Rhône were subjects or allies; and so on.  
 From the late second century BCE onwards  
 Roman armies were repeatedly drawn into  
 the hinterlands of the Mediterranean World,  
 and this required larger armies and greater  
 co-ordination. Once these were supplied the  
 results were at first impressive. During the  
 last century BCE a series of generals, begin-  
 ning with Marius and Sulla, showed what one  
 general could achieve given very large forces  
 for a substantial period of time and more or  
 less freedom of action to make war and peace  
 on whom he saw fit. 'Peripheral imperial-  
 ism' enabled Pompey to conquer and settle  
 much of Anatolia, the southern Black Sea  
 coast, and the Near East, and allowed Caesar  
 to make similar conquests in the north-west  
 (Richardson 1986). Yet neither these large  
 armies nor their generals could easily be  
 contained with the institutions of the city of  
 Rome. The logic of these developments was  
 the shift from Republic to monarchy. One of  
 the first acts of the first emperor was to create  
 a professional army bound to himself and his  
 family, and paid for from hypothecated tax  
 income and a military treasury. In that sense  
 the Roman Empire was a product of Roman  
 imperialism.

None of this helps to explain, however,  
 Rome's initial success. If it did not depend  
 on extraordinary institutions or the virtue of  
 generations of Roman aristocrats how are  
 we to explain it? One answer is to set it in the  
 context of wider histories of political growth  
 in the Mediterranean world (Garnsey and  
 Whittaker 1978). The size of political systems  
 was increasing and their number decreasing  
 over the last millennium BCE, presumably as  
 a result of competition within an open sys-  
 tem, economic growth and some advances in  
 communications. The question then becomes  
 why was Rome one of the eventual winners?  
 Geopolitics might help. Rome benefited from  
 a central position first within Italy, and later  
 within the Mediterranean basin. Perhaps too  
 Rome's position on the margin of politically  
 plural systems helped: it was on the edge of



1 the Etruscan city state civilisation, and later  
 2 on the edge of the Hellenistic kingdoms,  
 3 and that position (also enjoyed by Qin in the  
 4 Warring States period, or Macedon in the  
 5 fourth century BCE) seems to sometimes con-  
 6 fer an advantage. Complexes of peer-polities  
 7 often advance together, but sometimes tend  
 8 to limit the rise of any one polity, through  
 9 alliances of the others (Ma 2003; Renfrew  
 10 and Cherry 1986). Change, or contingency,  
 11 played a part too. Roman schoolchildren liked  
 12 to debate what would have happened had  
 13 Hannibal marched on Rome after Cannae,  
 14 and Greek writers occasionally wondered  
 15 what would have happened had Alexander  
 16 marched west. We might also wonder how  
 17 close Rome came to defeat in the Mithradatic  
 18 Wars, or much later in the third-century  
 19 crisis.

### 22 The tributary empire

23 If a conquest state is a polity dependent on  
 24 constant expansion, a tributary empire is  
 25 similarly invested in more sustainable and  
 26 stable institutions (Bang and Bayly 2011;  
 27 Crone 1989). Its political economy is based on  
 28 regular exactions which are largely redistrib-  
 29 uted to the military, to officials, and to those  
 30 who occupy privileged positions in the hierar-  
 31 chy of power. The rulers of tributary empires  
 32 typically seek to reduce their transaction costs –  
 33 imposing the running costs of empire on  
 34 local elites, tax farmers, and the like – and  
 35 they have few ambitions beyond retaining  
 36 and passing on their power. Empires of this  
 37 kind have been among the most stable politi-  
 38 cal in world history, often enduring for cen-  
 39 turies (Arnason and Raaflaub 2011). Typically  
 40 they are characterised by universalising ideol-  
 41 ogies, and their rulers actively suppress signs  
 42 of change and information about opposi-  
 43 tion (Bang and Kolodziejczyk 2012; Yuge and  
 44 Doi 1988).

45 Rome extracted no revenue from its mili-  
 46 tary supremacy until after it dominated the  
 47 whole of the Italian peninsula. Campaigns  
 48 paid for themselves, and the defeated contrib-  
 49 uted levies to future campaigns. Hellenistic  
 50 kingdoms, by contrast, most of which were  
 51 in effect successor states to the Achaemenid  
 52 Persian Empire, had complex taxation sys-  
 53 tems. Once Rome began to extend its power  
 54 overseas it encountered and incorporated  
 55 some of these systems, and also began to  
 56 need (or desire) greater revenues. One of the

first fiscal systems taken over by Rome was  
 a tithe levied on the cities of the kingdom  
 of Syracuse by the third-century king Hiero  
 II. After the second Punic war this system  
 (the *Lex Hieronica*) was extended to the whole  
 island province, and its revenues redirected to  
 Rome. The same war brought Rome control  
 of much of Mediterranean Spain, including  
 silver mines near Cartagena. That conquest,  
 and a need to provision Roman armies based  
 for long periods in Spain, led in the second  
 century to a regular levy on subject communi-  
 ties, the first provincial tax system devised by  
 Rome (Richardson 1976). When the kingdom  
 of Pergamum was acquired in 133 BCE the  
 royal tax system was incorporated in the same  
 way as the Syracusan one had been (Cottier  
 et al. 2008). The administration of Roman Egypt  
 owed much to Ptolemaic precedents, which in  
 turn drew on a deep sedimentation of Persian  
 and Pharaonic systems. Probably there were  
 other examples of this that are simply less  
 well documented.

The transition from conquest state to tribu-  
 tary empire was not a sudden one. Roman  
 armies of conquest never stopped extracting  
 booty from conquered peoples. The Romans'  
 initial response to the defeats of Carthage  
 and Macedon was to impose indemnities  
 to be paid in annual instalments over long  
 but not indefinite periods. Only when those  
 states were abolished was more regular taxa-  
 tion substituted. The tributary empire grew  
 up within the body of a conquest state. The  
 crucial period of change was the reign of  
 Augustus, the first emperor, when provincial  
 censuses were conducted across the empire  
 with the aim of fixing permanent tax obliga-  
 tions. Ordering the empire was by no means  
 a dry, bureaucratic process but was intimately  
 linked to the creation of new universalis-  
 ing ideology of power, expressed in poetry  
 and public monuments (Galinsky 1996; Gros  
 1976; Nicolet 1988; Zanker 1987). By the time  
 of Augustus's death in 14 CE most of the  
 empire was subject to taxation, only Italy and  
 a few privileged cities enjoying exemptions  
 from the land tax. Local civic elites collected  
 most of the land tax, overseen by imperial ex-  
 slaves and junior aristocrats named procura-  
 tors, who also managed the emperors' own  
 extensive provincial possessions and helped  
 supply the army. Soldiers assisted the procu-  
 rators where necessary, for example in escort-  
 ing tax grain or bullion. There were also  
 indirect taxes, for example on freeing slaves

1 and on sales, many of them still managed by  
 2 tax farmers (Brunt 1990). There were internal  
 3 tariffs on trade between groups of provinces  
 4 (France 2001). Over time tax-farmers seem  
 5 to have been replaced by officials but it was  
 6 a slow and patchy process, more a sign of a  
 7 shift in imperial attitudes to government than  
 8 of any global reorganisation. Bizarrely as it  
 9 seems to us – but quite normally for a patri-  
 10 monial empire – the whole was co-ordinated  
 11 not by some central agency, but within the  
 12 emperor's own household (Suetonius, *Divus*  
 13 *Augustus* 101).

14 If the main lines of a tributary empire had  
 15 emerged during the penultimate decade  
 16 of the last millennium BCE with the first  
 17 great provincial censuses, Rome continued  
 18 to behave in some ways as a conquest state  
 19 for some time longer. Augustus himself fol-  
 20 lowed up this reorganisation with a long  
 21 series of campaigns in temperate Europe that  
 22 consolidated Roman control of Caesar's con-  
 23 quests and the Balkans and advanced armies  
 24 up to and temporarily beyond the Rhine and  
 25 the Danube. A series of defeats, culminating  
 26 in a major disaster in 9 CE, slowed expansion.  
 27 But there were further wars in Germany under  
 28 his successor Tiberius and on the English  
 29 Channel under Gaius, and under Claudius  
 30 Britain was invaded. Later in the first cen-  
 31 tury CE there were campaigns in south-west  
 32 Germany as well as in Britain, before Trajan's  
 33 spectacular wars in metal-rich Dacia in the  
 34 early second century on the basis of which he  
 35 created the greatest of the imperial forums in  
 36 Rome, equipped with libraries, monumental  
 37 statues, and the column that bears his name.  
 38 One reason for these occasional expeditions –  
 39 often undertaken by emperors who needed  
 40 to demonstrate their ability – was that even  
 41 if Rome's political economy was no longer  
 42 geared to war, Roman public ideology could  
 43 not dispense with the connection between  
 44 virtue and warfare. All emperors were repre-  
 45 sented on statues, on coinage, and on monu-  
 46 ments in military dress, all tried to maintain  
 47 a close relation with the troops, and serious  
 48 instability occurred only (in the third cen-  
 49 tury) when emperors seemed no longer able  
 50 to be effective war leaders. Another reason  
 51 was that in many areas there was no obvious  
 52 natural frontier: several expeditions in Britain  
 53 and Germany do seem to have been designed  
 54 to find limits that might be more cheaply and  
 55 efficiently controlled. Yet the fact that the  
 56 empire barely expanded beyond its Augustan

limits indicates that on some level emperors  
 understood that they had more to lose than  
 gain by reckless and expensive campaigning.  
 Tiberius understood the bottom line when he  
 told one governor that he wanted his sheep  
 shorn, not flayed.

Much remains unclear about early imperial  
 tax systems. Taxes might be levied in cash or  
 kind, and although kind presumably mostly  
 meant agricultural produce examples are  
 known of levies of other materials such as  
 hides. But it is difficult to estimate the scale of  
 monetised taxation. There was certainly wide  
 variation in taxes and in mechanisms for their  
 extraction: wherever we can see local arrange-  
 ments in detail they are peculiar to that prov-  
 ince or region. Everywhere the burden fell  
 disproportionately on the poor and on those  
 who were not Roman citizens. Evidently the  
 emperors had no interest in creating empire-  
 wide systems, standards, or even tax rates. To  
 the end of the third century CE, the tax system  
 was really an agglomeration of local systems  
 designed in different periods according to dif-  
 ferent principles, subsequently emended and  
 supplemented, and run in a range of tradi-  
 tional ways (Brunt 1981). A number of inscrip-  
 tions which stated exactly which taxes were  
 current show that the system confused con-  
 temporaries as much as it does us.

If the emperors were not interested in  
 rationalising systems there were nevertheless  
 some consistencies in the kind of order they  
 created through this mixture of violence and  
 institutional bricolage. Most obviously they  
 enlisted the help in all parts of their empire  
 of the local ruling classes (Brunt 1976). Tribal  
 chiefs in Gaul and Palestine, the priests of  
 Egyptian temples, the wealthier members of  
 Greek cities, kings in the Alps, the Atlas, and  
 Anatolia, all were brought into a great coal-  
 ition of interest, and tied through marriage,  
 ceremony, and honours to the rulers of Rome.  
 The pattern is familiar from other imperial  
 systems (Cannadine 2001; Galtung 1971).  
 This was a key difference from the Republican  
 empire, which first in Italy and then around  
 the Mediterranean had failed to include local  
 rulers among the beneficiaries of empire.

### Control and its limits

The Roman Empire at its peak contained  
 around 60 million people, perhaps 20 per  
 cent of the global population. Its army never  
 exceeded 500,000 men and was usually much

1 smaller. It is evident that control could not  
2 depend on coercion alone.

3 It is widely agreed that a fundamental fac-  
4 tor stabilising the empire was the fact that  
5 it served the propertied classes of the socie-  
6 ties within it. Not only were they partners in  
7 extracting revenue. Many enjoyed the status  
8 of citizens, and by the second century the 'bet-  
9 ter sort of people' (termed *honestiores*) enjoyed  
10 privileged legal status too, being treated bet-  
11 ter than others in investigations and, if found  
12 guilty, in terms of penalty (Garnsey 1970).  
13 Many found it easy to participate in the gov-  
14 ernance of the empire, becoming auxiliary  
15 commanders, members of the equestrian  
16 order, and even members of the senate. A few  
17 enjoyed the friendship and patronage of prom-  
18 inent Romans and even the emperor (Saller  
19 1982). Interest was converted, at least among  
20 some of them, into a sense of membership and  
21 adherence to the imperial order. When dynas-  
22 ties collapsed new ones were put into place by  
23 alliances of courtiers, senators, and soldiers,  
24 all of whom had vested interests in the status  
25 quo. Beyond the wealthy it is difficult to gauge  
26 allegiances or opinion. Ceremony, ideology,  
27 monumentality, and governmentality together  
28 formed willing subjects in many places (Ando  
29 2000). We know most about urban popula-  
30 tions, especially those of Italy, but in those  
31 locations at least there are no real signs of  
32 disaffection. Urban populations, and not just  
33 their rulers, participated with enthusiasm in  
34 ruler cults of all sorts (Cancik and Hitzl 2003;  
35 Price 1984; Small 1996). More generally it is  
36 evident that a set of empire-wide cultural prac-  
37 tices, styles, and habits became routine (Woolf  
38 1998). How often participation in this was  
39 experienced consciously as political adherence  
40 is very difficult to say.

41 The alternative is to concentrate on epi-  
42 sodes of unrest (Bowersock 1987; Momigliano  
43 1987; Shaw 2000; Woolf 2011). Relatively few  
44 are well documented, and although this prob-  
45 ably partly reflects deliberate under-reporting,  
46 those that are mentioned occurred in broadly  
47 similar circumstances. A number of conflicts  
48 took place in the generation immediately after  
49 conquest, and seem to have been fuelled in  
50 part by the social convulsions and transfor-  
51 mations that affected many societies (Dyson  
52 1971, 1975). Areas close to the edge of the  
53 empire – whether the northern frontier or the  
54 Romano-Parthian borderlands – were more  
55 likely to experience revolts than other regions.  
56 Revolts were more common in time of Roman

civil war. Mountainous areas were more diffi-  
cult to control than plains or coasts. None of  
this is surprising. Attempts to link these out-  
breaks of opposition to cultural differences  
(e.g. Bénabou 1976) have not convinced many.  
A number of local disturbances seem to have  
had mainly local roots (Goodman 1987): per-  
haps this would be true of most if we had bet-  
ter information. Few were serious: the main  
threats to the authority of emperors came  
either from their intimate circle (from which  
assassinations emerged) or from armies led by  
their rivals. There were surprisingly few mili-  
tary revolts of that kind before the early third  
century CE (Shaw 1983; Woolf 1993). In all  
these respects Roman imperialism seems very  
like that of other early empires.

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