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 titulature 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 titulature 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 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.

© Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited. Any reuse requests to be sent to rights@palgrave.com
2 Rome and Imperialism

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

The phases of Roman expansion

The full story of the growth, stabilisation, and collapse of Roman political domination can only be sketched out here (see Champion 2004; Nicolet 1977; Woolf 2012). Roman tradition dated the foundation of the city to the middle of the eighth century BCE, and archaeological research suggests that the site of Rome was at least occupied by that point. The institutions of a city state emerged around the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, probably a little later than in Etruria (Tuscany) just to the north or in the areas to the south where Greek cities were created. During the first half of the last millennium BCE, urban settlements and archaic states were created all around the Mediterranean and Black Seas. By the fifth century BCE some larger states – Athens, Sparta, Syracuse, and Carthage are the most famous – were coming to dominate their neighbours. Rome was not in quite the same league as these powers, but was probably already expanding at the expense of its 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 Antigonean Macedon – and a number of smaller states that aspired to the same status, among them the kingdoms of Bithynia, Pontus, and Pergamon in Asia Minor and the kingdom 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.
A series of wars with Carthage (the Punic Wars) in 264–241 BCE, 218–201 BCE, and 149–146 BCE gave Rome control of the western Mediterranean. The first Punic war was fought largely over Sicily and resulted in Rome becoming a naval power, as well as the creation of the first overseas provinces in Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica. The second Punic war saw Hannibal cross the Alps but then be driven out of Italy, and Rome assert control over the entirety of Mediterranean Spain. Carthage was destroyed in 146 BCE and Rome established a foothold in north Africa; the Macedonian kingdom was defeated in 197 BCE and the Syrian kingdom in 188 BCE. Rome did not immediately annex any territory east of the Adriatic, and to begin with it seemed content to extract plunder, disrupt local hegemonies, and leave the region in the control of its allies. This proved unsustainable or at least unstable. Macedon was again defeated in 168 BCE and the kingdom was abolished, to be replaced with four city states. Rome soon fell out with most of its east Mediterranean allies. The last king of Pergamum left his kingdom to Rome in his will, and so by the end of the second century Rome had provinces in the Balkans and western Asia Minor, had obliterated the ancient city of Corinth as an example of what happened to defiant allies, and seemed to contemporary observers like the Greek historian Polybius to be the undisputed ruler of the civilised world. Rome had not, however, developed very efficient institutions of control and relied on contractors to extract revenue, basing no troops and very few officials in the east, and expecting both conquered territories and other powers (like Egypt) to accept orders from Roman envoys. When Mithradates, King of Pontus, invaded first the Roman province of Asia and then southern Greece he was able to exploit Rome’s unpopularity, and Rome briefly lost control of all her possessions east of the Adriatic. That crisis coincided with a major rebellion by most of Rome’s Italian allies. The first half of the last century BCE was largely spent re-establishing Roman control (Morstein Kallet-Marx 1995).

The instruments through which the Roman Republic took its empire in hand included armies serving for long periods overseas, the beginnings of a tributary structure, and the concentration of power into the hands of a small number of generals. 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-Mediterranean 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 territory, 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 campaigns 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 provinces in the course of the first century CE. Wars of conquest in Britain began in 43 CE, continuing sporadically but never taking permanent 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 frontier. At the end of the fourth century large numbers of Goths crossed the Danube, and they were followed in the next two generations by more tribes, some coming across the Rhine. Control over first Britain and then northern Gaul was lost during the fifth century, and Spain and Africa followed. By the
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.

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

The relationship between the Romans and
their gods was thought of more collectively.
Prodigies and omens were reported to the
senate; colleges of senatorial priests were
charged with devising and carrying out ritu-
als to ensure the gods remained supportive;
wars had to be declared according to particu-
lar rituals; generals consulted the heavens
before going to war, made battlefield vows
for success, and on their return set up tem-
ple to the gods concerned to acknowledge
their help. The ever-evolving ceremony of the
triumph brought the entire city together in a
collective restoration of the peaceful order
and a display of honour shared by the aristo-
ic general, the citizen army, and the gods
themselves (Beard 2007; Östenberg 2009). Yet
even in these collective ceremonies, indi-
viduals asserted themselves. Successful gen-
erals added the names of defeated peoples or
places to their own, both in ordinary usage
and on monuments (so Fabius Maximus
Allobrogicus after the Allobroges he defeated
in the middle Rhône valley, and Publius
Cornelius Scipio Africanus for his victories
in the Punic Wars). The streets of Republican
Rome came to be lined with victory temples,
often fulfilling vows made on the battlefield
by generals who paid for them from their
share of the booty, and were eventually deco-
rated with art works that commemorated
the triumphs of the Roman people (Holliday
2002). Temples of this kind were often main-
tained by the aristocratic descendants of the
dedicator, and at noble funerals distinguished
ancestors were animated by actors who wore
effigies of the dead and robes appropriate to
their status, while the military exploits of the
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 chastity
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-
osophy 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
ensure divine favour and to win the support of the popular assemblies that voted on war and peace. But these justifications, achieved by rhetoric and ritual, were focused on individual conflicts. Only in the last generation of the Republic did the notion emerge that Romans had a general mandate to conquer the world and rule it well (Brunt 1978; Ferrary 1988).

Ancient writers spent much less time trying to explain why Romans fought so many wars. One reason is that most ancient states were both warlike and engaged in sporadic disputes with their neighbours. City states generally fielded citizen armies, and military training was often a key part of the process by which young men became full citizens. Tribal communities seem also to have embraced a warrior ethos, to judge from grave goods and art works like Situla-Art of the Alps or the Gundestrup cauldron from Denmark. The question was not so much why cities and peoples came to blows, but rather why some did so more successfully than others. Thucydides had dramatised a debate on this theme between the Athenians and the Melians in the second book of his Peloponnesian War. The Athenians refuse to spare the Melians, on the ground that the strong always do what they can and the weak suffer what they must. A Roman legend told how when the Gauls were extracting indemnities from the Romans they were caught using false measures to weigh out gold. When challenged a Gallic chief pressed down the scale with his sword and claimed ‘Vae victis!’ (Woe to the vanquished! Livy, History of Rome 5.48.9). War was a normal state of affairs, and what was special about the Romans was not that they fought wars, but that they were so successful at doing so.

Explaining expansion

The modern debate over the origins of Republican imperialism has taken a more tortuous route than that followed by ancient explanations. On the basis of the Roman notion that only just wars received divine support and on Roman accounts of the origins of several conflicts, it was for a while argued that Rome expanded accidentally, along the lines of Sir John Robert Seeley’s quip that the British ‘conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind’ (1914: 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 demolished by the demonstration that Romans consistently 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 successful war (Beard 2007); and a series of devices for expanding the citizen body, and so the citizen army (Raaffbaur 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 century BCE or when migrations penetrated the Mediterranean world from temperate Europe (Rich 1993). But in general it is fair to characterise the Roman Republic as a society geared for war, and in some respects dependent on warfare to satisfy the demands of its aristocracy and people for glory and booty.

That gearing naturally encompassed economic activity of various kinds. Rome had no independent mercantile class that might lobby for annexation. Indeed annexation reduced some opportunities for profiteering, as in the case of the slave trade (enslavement 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 companies that played such prominent parts in British, Dutch, and other European imperialisms from the 17th century on. Corporations had very little place in Roman law, the closest equivalent being short-lived societates – partnerships – which tended for public contracts. The economic basis of pre-capitalist and capitalist imperialism was naturally very different.
All the same most sectors of Roman society benefited from expansion, directly or indirectly. Successful generals brought back great amounts of booty, and their personal share of it was not limited to what was spent on the gods or on triumphal feasts and games. Citizen soldiers and allies alike also received shares of the booty. The proceeds of conquest were spread more widely. The defeat of Macedon in 168 BCE was followed by the abandonment of direct taxation of Roman citizens in Italy. The sacks of Carthage and Corinth in 146 BCE were followed by a great aqueduct-project, and monuments were set up in Italian allied cities as well as in Rome. Public building did not only benefit citizens by creating a more splendid built environment and sponsoring festivals within it. Army supply, the extraction of revenue, and its expenditure in building projects all came to rely on public contracts, generally issued by the censors in Rome. These contracts included the construction of public basilicas, paved forums, and roads, in Roman colonies as well as in the city itself. Only citizens could take public contracts, and in principle senators were forbidden to be principals. But great amounts of property were needed to guarantee larger contracts, and it is clear that behind the main contractors (publicani), who were often members of Rome’s junior aristocracy, the equestrian order, there were senatorial backers. Polybius claimed in his Histories (6.17) that as early as the first half of the second century BCE ‘everyone’ in Rome was involved. For a brief period in the last century BCE, when some contracts were very large, especially for gathering the taxes of Asia, these bids and their five-yearly renewals did have political ramifications. But in general the propertied classes all benefited from empire.

Provincial populations bore the brunt. During the last century BCE in particular Roman power was exercised at the expense of provincial populations in many ways. Through plunder and purchase, the wealthy extracted cultural products from the Greek world – books and educated slaves as well as bronze and marble statuary and craftsmen. Caesar’s campaigns in Gaul removed so much bullion from the region that silver and gold coinages were effectively extinguished north of the Alps. Large sums of money were occasionally lent to provincials at extortionate rates of interest, in the knowledge that 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, prosecuted 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 Amalaus, Tacitus wrote that the provinces were unperurbed by the fall of the Republic because they had suffered so much from the feuding generals 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 enrichment 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 subscribe 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 explanation 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 objectives. Multi-state analysis of this kind, making use of political theory, has only just begun (Eckstein 2006, 2007). Besides, Roman institutions and ideas were in constant flux. Most
importantly, innovations often seem to have been reactions to expansion, not preparations for it. Broadening access to citizenship came in practice as response to a series of crises in Rome’s relations with her allies. The balance of power between magistrates and civil institutions that Polybius praised had in fact to shift over time as generals served further and further away from Rome and for longer periods. Perhaps the best illustration is provided by recent studies of the language of Roman imperialism (Richardson 2008). Romans developed territorial senses of provincia and imperium only in the last century BCE, long after they had de facto acquired first foreign possessions and then an identifiable sphere under permanent control. The same time lag is evident in the development of provincial taxation, in the elaboration of the role of governor from simply a military commander to a judicial official and plenipotentiary representative of Rome in the provinces, and in the gradual shift from annual citizen levies to what were in effect professional armies that might serve for years on end and needed to be re-integrated into society when they were disbanded. In each case these changes responded to expansion rather than being designed to facilitate it.

The period of fastest expansion was partly driven by the failure of annual campaigns around the Mediterranean basin to stabilise Roman hegemony. The victories of the second century were followed by the return and disbanding of Roman armies. No garrisons and no administrations were left behind. A system of military commands that emanated from a competitive political system meant that even when there were a number of armies and generals in the field at the same time there was no guarantee that they would co-operate. Rome depended for information on embassies sent by her allies, who were often rivals. Much of the history of the second century BCE seems to have been driven by competition in the periphery, and when that became engaged with factionalism in the centre the effects could be very disruptive. Finally, there were some intrinsic difficulties facing any power that wished to control the Mediterranean world. One was a high incidence of piracy and banditry, which thrived in periods of political fragmentation. Hellenistic kingdoms had struggled to maintain some order and their defeat by Rome 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 plateau; 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 coordination. Once these were supplied the results were at first impressive. During the last century BCE a series of generals, beginning 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 imperialism’ 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 system, 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
the Etruscan city state civilisation, and later on the edge of the Hellenistic kingdoms, and that position (also enjoyed by Qin in the Warring States period, or Macedon in the fourth century BCE) seems to sometimes confer an advantage. Complexes of peer-polities often advance together, but sometimes tend to limit the rise of any one polity, through alliances of the others (Ma 2003; Renfrew and Cherry 1986). Change, or contingency, played a part too. Roman schoolchildren liked to debate what would have happened had Hannibal marched on Rome after Cannae, and Greek writers occasionally wondered what would have happened had Alexander marched west. We might also wonder how close Rome came to defeat in the Mithradatic Wars, or much later in the third-century crisis.

The tributary empire

If a conquest state is a polity dependent on constant expansion, a tributary empire is similarly invested in more sustainable and stable institutions (Bang and Bayly 2011; Crone 1989). Its political economy is based on regular exactions which are largely redistributed to the military, to officials, and to those who occupy privileged positions in the hierarchy of power. The rulers of tributary empires typically seek to reduce their transaction costs—imposing the running costs of empire on local elites, tax farmers, and the like—and they have few ambitions beyond retaining and passing on their power. Empires of this kind have been among the most stable political in world history, often enduring for centuries (Armsen and Raafat 2011). Typically they are characterised by universalising ideologies, and their rulers actively suppress signs of change and information about opposition (Bang and Kołodziejczyz 2012; Yuge and Doi 1988).

Rome extracted no revenue from its military supremacy until after it dominated the whole of the Italian peninsula. Campaigns paid for themselves, and the defeated contributed levies to future campaigns. Hellenistic kingdoms, by contrast, most of which were in effect successor states to the Achaemenid Persian Empire, had complex taxation systems. Once Rome began to extend its power overseas it encountered and incorporated some of these systems, and also began to 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 communities, 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 (Cottet 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 tributary 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 taxation 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 obligations. Ordering the empire was by no means a dry, bureaucratic process but was intimately linked to the creation of new universalising 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 procurators, who also managed the emperors’ own extensive provincial possessions and helped supply the army. Soldiers assisted the procurators where necessary, for example in escorting tax grain or bullion. There were also indirect taxes, for example on freeing slaves

© Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited. Any reuse requests to be sent to rights@palgrave.com
10 Rome and Imperialism

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

If the main lines of a tributary empire had
demerged during the penultimate decade
of the last millennium BCE with the first
great provincial censuses, Rome continued
to behave in some ways as a conquest state
for some time longer. Augustus himself fol-
lowed up this reorganisation with a long
series of campaigns in temperate Europe that
consolidated Roman control of Caesar’s con-
quests and the Balkans and advanced armies
up to and temporarily beyond the Rhine and
the Danube. A series of defeats, culminating
in a major disaster in 9 CE, slowed expansion.

But there were further wars in Germany under
his successor Tiberius and on the English
Channel under Gaius, and under Claudius
Britain was invaded. Later in the first cen-
tury CE there were campaigns in south-west
Germany as well as in Britain, before Trajan’s
spectacular wars in metal-rich Dacia in the
early second century on the basis of which he
created the greatest of the imperial forums in
Rome, equipped with libraries, monumental
statues, and the column that bears his name.

One reason for these occasional expeditions –
often undertaken by emperors who needed
to demonstrate their ability – was that even
if Rome’s political economy was no longer
gear ed to war, Roman public ideology could
not dispense with the connection between
virtue and warfare. All emperors were repre-
sented on statues, on coinage, and on monu-
ments in military dress, all tried to maintain
close relation with the troops, and serious
instability occurred only (in the third cen-
tury) when emperors seemed no longer able
to be effective war leaders. Another reason
was that in many areas there was no obvious
natural frontier: several expeditions in Britain
and Germany do seem to have been designed
to find limits that might be more cheaply and
efficiently controlled. Yet the fact that the
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 coali-
tion 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

© Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited. Any reuse requests to be sent to rights@palgrave.com
smaller. It is evident that control could not depend on coercion alone.

It is widely agreed that a fundamental factor stabilising the empire was the fact that it served the propertied classes of the societies within it. Not only were they partners in extracting revenue. Many enjoyed the status of citizens, and by the second century the ‘better sort of people’ (termed honestiores) enjoyed privileged legal status too, being treated better than others in investigations and, if found guilty, in terms of penalty (Garnsey 1970). Many found it easy to participate in the governance of the empire, becoming auxiliary commanders, members of the equestrian order, and even members of the senate. A few enjoyed the friendship and patronage of prominent Romans and even the emperor (Saller 1982). Interest was converted, at least among some of them, into a sense of membership and adherence to the imperial order. When dynasties collapsed new ones were put into place by alliances of courtiers, senators, and soldiers, all of whom had vested interests in the status quo. Beyond the wealthy it is difficult to gauge allegiances or opinion. Ceremony, ideology, monumentality, and governmentality together formed willing subjects in many places (Ando 2000). We know most about urban populations, especially those of Italy, but in those locations at least there are no real signs of disaffection. Urban populations, and not just their rulers, participated with enthusiasm in ruler cults of all sorts (Cancik and Hitzl 2003; Price 1984; Small 1996). More generally it is evident that the urban cultural practices, styles, and habits became routine (Woolf 1998). How often participation in this was experienced consciously as political adherence is very difficult to say.

The alternative is to concentrate on episodes of unrest (Bowersock 1987; Momigliano 1987; Shaw 2000; Woolf 2011). Relatively few are well documented, and although this probably partly reflects deliberate under-reporting, those that are mentioned occurred in broadly similar circumstances. A number of conflicts took place in the generation immediately after conquest, and seem to have been fuelled in part by the social convulsions and transformations that affected many societies (Dyson 1971, 1975). Areas close to the edge of the empire – whether the northern frontier or the Romano-Parthian borderlands – were more likely to experience revolts than other regions. Revolts were more common in time of Roman civil war. Mountainous areas were more difficult to control than plains or coasts. None of this is surprising. Attempts to link these outbreaks 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): perhaps this would be true of most if we had better 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 military 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.

Greg Woolf

References


12 Rome and Imperialism


14 Rome and Imperialism

Presented at a Conference Held in the University of Alberta on April 13–15, 1994 to Celebrate the 65th Anniversary of Duncan Fishwick.

Ann Arbor, MI: Journal of Roman Archaeology.


