

“Roman Imperialism between Republic and Empire”

Prof. Carlos Noreña, History, UCB.

<http://orias.berkeley.edu/summer2010/Summer2010Home.htm>

Summarized by Timothy Doran

The period of Rome’s rapid imperial expansion occurred during the Republic (509 – 27 BC); ironically, slower expansion marked the period of the Empire (after 27 BC). During the Republic, many mechanisms existed through which the people could express their sovereignty. Different sectors of the Roman people were able to engage in decision-making. Numerous discrete decision-making bodies existed. In contrast, the Empire occurred when the state was ruled by a hereditary monarchy. The system of autocracy in the late first century BC may or may not be argued to have been a monarchy. Confusingly perhaps, the term “Roman Empire” is used both to indicate the phase in time in which an emperor ruled, and also the geographical extent of the areas under Roman rule. The latter may be better indicated as empire rather than Empire: with a lower-case e rather than an upper-case E.

The question is whether there was a meaningful correspondence between, on the one hand, the rate, scale, and intensity of territorial expansion and on the other, the mode of Roman governance.

During the period of Roman imperial expansion during the Republic, many administrative arrangements by which Rome controlled the Italian peninsula which were also used for extra-peninsular control. In 241 BC, Rome defeated the city-state of Carthage in what had been a long-standing conflict. As a result of this victory, Rome added its first *overseas* province, the island of Sicily. Several years later, through a series of shady dealings, the Romans also acquire Sardinia and Corsica. Rome was now exercising territorial control over spaces outside the Italian peninsula. Rome warred with Carthage again, and defeated it again, in 202 BC, thusly acquiring most of the Iberian peninsula and most of Spain as two separate provinces. When Rome acquired new territory it regularized the process by which the Romans sent armies to the new area. Even after Carthage was defeated, Rome still sent armies there, and the Romans then saw how advantageous it was to be able to continue to send armies there. It set up a governor. There was no moment when a Roman in the Senate house says “it would be nice to control Spain.” Rather, it was more gradual.

With the second defeat of Carthage in 202, Rome became the undisputed power in the western Mediterranean. Rome then began dealing more with the large kingdoms of the Eastern Mediterranean which were formed by the successors of Alexander the Great, namely the Hellenistic kingdoms. These kingdoms had developed into quite sophisticated, centralized states. Various campaigns were fought in the Eastern Mediterranean, typically with Rome winning decisively, then going back to Italy, without annexing a millimeter of territory. Eventually the Romans became tired of this and decide to start taking over territory and administering it directly in the second half of the second century BC. Northern Greece and Macedonia were annexed in 148 BC. The province of “Asia” (that is, the Western half of Turkey) was annexed in 133 BC. Rome was now obtaining a big foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean. A final battle with

Carthage occurred in the mid-second century BC. Rome defeated them in 146 BC. The Romans at that point decided to annex the area around Carthage, and create the province called Africa, mainly modern Tunisia.

By the mid-2nd century BC, Romans became more accustomed to controlling the Iberian peninsula. They were extracting more resources. They needed to have a non-problematic route to send soldiers to Spain from Italy; so they declared a narrow strip of Southern France to be Roman now.

The pace and tempo of Roman imperialism went into overdrive in the first century BC. This occurred because of political competition between elite land-owners and aristocratic generals. One individual who pushed this process forward was Pompeius Magnus, an important, aggressive, ambitious Roman aristocratic senator given wider and wider authority and military commands in the Eastern Mediterranean in which he defeated many Hellenistic kings and their territories, creating Roman provinces there instead. His main competitor in the Roman imperial system was Julius Caesar who launched, in response, a decade-long campaign of conquest in Gaul. The Roman empire thus grew quite rapidly. And in the next generation, the conflict continued between Octavian – the grand-nephew of Caesar, who was adopted as Caesar's heir and son – versus Marcus Antonius who had been Caesar's right hand man. Octavian controlled much of the Western Mediterranean; Mark Antony, the Eastern. Octavian prevailed and eliminated the Macedonian throne in Egypt. As Octavian amassed power and stabilized it, he changed his name to Augustus. During the course of his long rule, generals took over the Rhineland, the Danubian regions, and more. At that point, expansion slowed down.

When trying to understand Roman expansion, the distinction between the Western and Eastern Mediterranean is important. In the West, the only state-level competitor – that is, with an elaborate economy, urban society, advanced resource base – that Rome faced had been Carthage. Otherwise Rome's conquests in the West were over tribal groups with very rudimentary structures of organization, low levels of urbanization, and more. In the East, there were three state-level competitors: large areas with resources comparable to Rome, advanced structures of political organization and centralization, and with complex, highly urbanized settlements. Technologies of resource extraction were more advanced and permitted higher populations.

Most scholars would point to the role played by Italian manpower to explain Rome's successes. The Romans were able to field more soldiers than their enemies could. This is because when Rome was in the process of conquering the Italian peninsula, unlike other conquering powers in the Ancient Mediterranean world, it incorporated the conquered (*parcere subiectis* is the relevant line from Vergil's *Aeneid*) and asked for troops rather than taxes. With every victory, the Roman army got bigger and stronger. The Italian communities received some of the benefits of imperial expansion. But Rome was able to **transcend the limitations of the city-state**. They fought not only supported by their own citizens, but by the citizens of those whom they had conquered. Their sustained military effort was unparalleled in other agrarian societies: over 200 years, they had 15% of their adult males in their military.

What motivated Roman imperialism, though? What motivated this extraordinary long-term commitment to expansion? Roman imperialism is of course a complex phenomenon, and a monocausal explanation is unlikely to be satisfying. A structural explanation is necessary to account for the lengthiness of the process. Both the West and the East became incorporated into the empire, and they were very different. A *general* explanation needs to be able to account for both West and East.

Five different big theories have arisen over the centuries:

First theory: philhellenism. Literally, a love of Greek things. Rome came to value the superiority of Greek culture. They fought a series of wars to protect the Greeks and to protect Greek autonomy against powerful, dangerous Hellenistic kings. This doesn't explain anything for the Western empire so cannot be a *general* explanation.

Second theory: diplomatic entanglements. The Romans kept a high value on the keeping of promises. Trust, honor, and faith: *pistis* in Greek, *fides* in Latin. A series of formal treaties was conducted with a series of states; so Rome became dragged into the problems of these states. This is again more true of the East than of the West.

Third theory: theory of defensive imperialism. Rome had no real drive to expand but was only protecting peninsular Italy. Romans only wanted to protect the heartland, not to annex territory. But some wars were quite aggressive and armies went far abroad, not always near Italy.

Fourth theory: economic motivations. Conquest brings economic benefits to the conquering power. But why did they refuse to annex territory for so long? And some Roman actions contradict this theory. For example, in 168 BC when they annexed Macedonia, they shut the silver mines down, rather than using the silver.

Fifth theory: a peculiarly Roman aristocratic ethos. The Roman aristocracy, particularly the senators, grew up with and had imbibed a very strong ethos of military accomplishment. Conquest defined being a man and being an elite. Military success, social status, and political power were bound together. There is plenty of unambiguous evidence for this, but all societies in the ancient Mediterranean had developed this ethos. Roman aristocratic aggression was not anomalous.

Professor Norena favors an explanation that combines bits and pieces of these. A combination of the elite valuation of warfare with economic motivation is probably right.

How did the empire as a whole work, *following* this period of expansion? During the period of the first two centuries AD, the Roman army was composed of 350,000 soldiers. This was the biggest, best-trained, best-equipped standing army the world had ever seen. 30 legions were always stationed around the empire of 5000 – 6000 men apiece. The army defended the frontiers against external threats and also policed the interior. The army consumed roughly 70% of the annual budget. The army was paid by revenues collected in the Empire itself, above all through taxes. A Roman army in place is an institution that generates fear. People pay taxes which go to the army itself. It is a

cyclical process. This is a very good example of a protection racket, as the sociologist Charles Tilley has pointed out.

There was a great shift from Republic to Empire. During the Republic, profits went to individual generals, and they competed against each other aggressively. During the Empire, war was limited and defensive, driven mainly by empire-wide strategic considerations, with profits coming systematically and going to the empire as a whole. A dialectic and cyclical process was probably going on. Conquered communities supplied troops. Conquest of the entire Mediterranean was driven by aristocratic competition. An aristocratic solidarity existed, dictating that no one family or person should become more powerful than anyone else. This consensus collapsed in the first century BC and there came about a wild imbalance in power, resulting in a collapse in power. Change in warfare and success in warfare caused monarchy, which caused a change in the manner that wars were being fought. It was precisely the institution of monarchy – the concentration of power in Augustus – that suppressed and controlled the aristocratic competition during the Republic.

The empire, as maps show, was created by a republican city state. This is very unusual. Almost always, a monarchically-led state creates empire. Very few empires have been republican: there is Athens, Carthage, Venice, Rome, and a very few more. The rise of monarchy at Rome was not accidental. A stable monarchy replaced an erratic republic.

Final note: the American parallel. Is this apropos? The diffusion of American power around the globe has some imperial elements to it. The increase of political centralization of this country, and the growing power of the executive branch of this government, are indicators of a change in strategy. Longer-term, an ever more influential and dominant executive branch in our government has grown since the Second World War. Analogous conditions that brought about the collapse of the Republic and creation of a monarchy under Augustus cause us to have some concern about the American example.