1 Views of Roman Imperialism through Time

Introduction

In the summer of 1897, Sigmund Freud came within fifty miles of Rome, but, for the second time, he could not bring himself to make the journey to the city as he had planned to do. In recounting the episode, he mused that he might have developed a "Roman neurosis," which would inhibit him from entering the eternal city. A cosmopolitan Viennese like him could hardly have been daunted by the hastily expanded new capital of the Kingdom of Italy. Nor was it simply the small-minded, bigoted capital of Catholicism that repelled the tolerant Jew in him. Acutely dissecting his quirks as usual, Freud uncovered the root of his unexpected inhibition in the long shadow that ancient Rome was still casting on his consciousness. He saw the Roman Empire, together with the Christian Church that succeeded it, as relentless, sprawling, engulfing organizations that scared him and turned him away. In his mind, Rome was an oppressive, almighty force, like a terrible father. He recalled how, as a schoolboy, he had instinctively taken the doomed side of Hannibal. He claimed to have felt an instinctive kinship with the noble Semitic rebel. Now sitting outside Rome, he learnedly speculated that perhaps, just like Hannibal, he was destined to come within sight of the walls but never to clear them.[1]

Freud was naturally inclined to treat his own perception of ancient Rome entirely as a reflection of his own idiosyncratic perspective on life and history, rather than being a product of the biases embedded in the scholarship of the time. But the textbooks that had shaped his views on Rome during his *Hochgymnasium* years arguably did not have a much stronger claim to a balanced assessment of the great empire than his admittedly irrational fantasies. Indeed, the vaunted objective and scientific picture of Roman imperialism that fellow German-speakers had painstakingly put together

[1] Simmons 2006. Many interpretations of Freud's "Roman phobia" have been advanced. See an effective overview in Timpanaro 1984, which convincingly demonstrates that it was Rome as a historical icon (rather than as a symbol of oppressive fatherhood or longed-for motherhood) that played on Freud's imagination. In 1901, however, Freud evidently got over himself and finally paid an extended visit to the city, which he repeated many times afterwards.

during Freud's lifetime was in great part the result of similarly visceral prejudices and deep-seated assumptions. Rome's terrifying historiographical presence was not simply a scholarly construction, nor was it, as all our attempts at narrating the past inevitably are, only a way of making sense of the present. By Freud's time, the story of Rome's ascent had been treated unlike any other comparable process. It still occupies a unique place in most intellectual traditions. The peculiar way in which Rome and especially its expansion have been construed for the last 2,000 years offers an unrivaled example of how self-sustaining traditions can acquire a life of their own.

A very long time before the Belle Époque, far less impressionable spirits than Freud had been utterly awed by the success of Rome. It is no exaggeration to say that few, if any, other historical processes have had a comparable evocative power. The rapid growth of large empires has always attracted the attention of posterity, but no rags-to-riches story has been as virally pervasive as that of Rome. The meteoric rise of Alexander or the vigorous feudal welding of Charlemagne may have had powerful afterlives, but in the end nothing could truly match the powerful fascination exerted by the image projected by Rome, with its collective rather than individual action, with its triumph of superior moral qualities and with the indelible impact it had on everything that followed. No scholarly discourse can ever abstract from dominant popular perceptions, and this is particularly true in the case of Rome's expansion. Precisely because of its cultural ubiquity, the narratives about Rome have tended to remain confined within a relatively narrow interpretative range. Many scholars are animated by a drive to subvert the frameworks of the previous generations, so that new ones can be advanced. And yet, there are some assumptions about the Roman conquest that are rooted in long-standing, universal perceptions of this process and that consequently have gone largely unchallenged so far. This may seem hard to believe when one considers the sheer mass of studies published on Rome and its reception over the last century or so, but it can perhaps be explained with reference to the peculiar place that the Roman past has had in the emergence of modern historical thinking. When the accepted view on some topic is as central to an entire cultural, philosophical, and educational system, it can be particularly difficult to call into question such deep foundations without appearing to flirt with nonsense. In a way, some fundamental ideas about the essential nature of the Roman conquest have yet to be evaluated and tested in full. They have been taken for granted because they were part of the narrative since the first time it was told, soon after the events transpired.

Reviewing here, once more, scholarly and popular views on Roman imperialism is not just an exercise in intellectual history. It can instead provide a valuable point of departure for innovative and unconventional new reconstructions. While the broader field of classical reception studies has flourished in recent decades, it has not always been the case that the results of those deconstructive attempts have had a direct, constructive impact on the production of different historical ideas about Rome.[2] Attempting to do precisely this in the specific case of the expansion of Rome may yield interesting results, especially when one considers how this part of the story has always figured prominently in scholarly and lay narratives alike, but has been the object of fewer reflexive studies than many others.[3] At this point in the debate, retracing the afterlife of Roman imperialism may prove tangibly beneficial to a radical rethinking of this process. An entire book could barely do full justice to this rich and complex tradition,[4] so the present overview will necessarily be incomplete and summary, and yet indispensable for the kind of comprehensive historical revision that is attempted here. It will also necessarily deal with views of the whole extent of Roman imperialism, rather than specifically with the early part of it. This is because most opinions about it, especially in the pre-modern period, referred to the entire process, from the siege of Veii to the invasions of Britain and Dacia. In those formulations, however, the fourth and third centuries BCE always played a very significant role, so that they are highly relevant to the period discussed in the following chapters.

Debating Roman Imperialism: The Early Days

It is obvious that the discourse on the beginning of Roman expansion was already under way at the time the events themselves were unfolding, but our earliest information comes from writers dating to an advanced stage of the process, like Polybius, or to its tail end, like Cicero, Livy, or Tacitus. The voices of the actual people who turned the small Roman state into a world power are all but lost to us and we have only those of the men, like Caesar or Trajan, who expanded an empire that already had no rivals. What little survives, like the epitaph of the general Scipio Barbatus (who died in 280

[2] Recent overviews in Hardwick and Stray 2008; Walde and Egger 2012.
[3] Reference is made here to reflexivity theory, for which see among others Bourdieu 2001.
[4] A book that has not yet been written. Important work in this sense is contained in Desideri 1991; Hingley 2001; Millar 2002. My own contribution in the latter volume, Terrenato 2001a, contains some of the basic ideas underpinning this chapter.

BCE), evokes for us a rhetoric based on military and civilian achievement.[5] The key factor that made it possible is valor (*virtus*), an indispensable moral quality for the successful office-holder.[6] The empire seems to be the natural consequence of the valorous, honorable, and legitimate actions undertaken by Roman elites, and its expansion must be a primary goal of its elites. Much of the later Roman discourse would present conflict and conquest as duty-bound responses to complex diplomatic entanglements, to outside threats or harassment or to outright aggression, without ever articulating a grand strategy.[7] Greek observers like Polybius, on the other hand, could see an explicit imperialist agenda in the action of Rome, similar to those that competing Mediterranean expansionists had tried to advance. Polybius did not find what the Romans did abhorrent, however, and he agreed with them in attributing their success to the nature and structure of their society. Like a good Greek thinker, he paid particular attention to political abstractions and identified the secret ingredient as Rome's moderate constitution, rather than as any specific behavioral trait.[8]

Later on, Cicero and his contemporaries placed an even greater emphasis on moral qualities: for the great orator, the Romans only fought just wars, i.e. wars sparked by a provocation or by legitimate defensive concerns, and preceded by a ritually prescribed formal declaration. Indeed, scrupulous Roman piety would be essential to securing the divine favor without which no imperial success would be possible.[9] For Cicero, another important ingredient is moderation in the treatment of defeated enemies, a magnanimous policy that inspires loyalty and further affirms the superiority of the conquerors. Instead, when provincial governors greedily exploit their subjects, the morality of empire is at risk.[10] His idea that, at least in their pristine form, the Romans were intrinsically a cut above everyone else, and thus worthy of leadership, would go on to influence views of the conquest for centuries after his time.[11] What debate there might have been among Roman intellectuals in the heyday of the empire revolved mainly around the ethics of the conquest or the best administrative policies to

[5] Badian 1968: 12–13; La Regina 1968.
[6] McDonnell 2006; Balmaceda 2017.
[7] These ideas will go on to constitute the foundation of modern theories of defensive imperialism, see pp. 18–22.
[8] Musti 1978; Eckstein 1995; Millar 2002: 23–36; Baronowski 2011; also several of the papers in Derow, Smith, and Yarrow 2012.
[9] Brunt 1978; Rose 1995.
[10] Griffin 2008; the importance of Roman clemency is also emphasized in Vergil and Livy, Adler 2003.
[11] Steel 2001.

adopt in the conquered lands.[12] In the first few centuries CE, the Roman Empire was such a well-established, apparently indestructible institution that the causes that had brought it about tended to be taken for granted. Professional eulogizers like Aelius Aristides sang the praises of the Romans as "dominators by nature,"[13] and even more critical thinkers connected with actual resistance movements, like Flavius Josephus, saw something inherently immanent and universal in the great empire, despite its occasional shortcomings.[14]

Taking a general look at the Roman perception of their own imperial success, it is clear that their narrative of the conquest, in hindsight, had the Romans as the only real characters and focused exclusively on their actions, their thought processes and their moral traits. Internal political and historiographical debates did take place, but they never questioned the axiom that what made such an unprecedented ascent possible was to be sought within Rome itself, in its ideal location, in the unique spiritual, military, or constitutional qualities of its polity.[15] Rome's pragmatism and adaptability were emphasized in some historical traditions and political speeches.[16] Non-Romans, however defined, were typically treated briefly and mostly in terms of their friendliness or animosity towards Rome. They could be depicted as very aggressive, and in some cases as terrifying (as in the case of Hannibal or of the Gauls), but they did not shape the empire in any significant way. Even if their resistance and their indomitability might have been admired (for instance that of the Samnites), it did not affect the final outcome. Subtler strategies, from back-channel diplomacy and bribery to false compliance and foot-dragging did not figure much in the established narratives. The willingness of the Romans to incorporate non-Romans and, by granting them citizenship over time, turn them into Romans, was, on the other hand, sometimes highlighted as an important component, in which however the grantees were nothing more than grateful recipients of an enlightened policy.[17] Similarly, broader political and economic circumstances and conjunctures that might have played a role in

[12] In Tacitus and elsewhere, the ethical implications of the conquest were considered, especially in fictional speeches given by enemy leaders, Clarke 2001; Adler 2011.
[13] Desideri 1991; Fontanella 2008.
[14] E.g., Schwartz 2001.
[15] Nicolet 1997.
[16] Humm 2007: 281–83; Armstrong 2016: 112–14.
[17] In terms of contemporary treatments, most notable are a letter of the Macedonian king Philip V describing Roman citizenship policies and a speech of the emperor Claudius, both remarking on the long-standing policy of admitting conquered people into the empire; Griffin 1982; Kousser 2005; Kleijwegt 2009. For the issue in general, Woolf 2012: 218–32.

the expansion were consistently underplayed. To give just an example, little or no consideration was typically given to the fact that central Italy, unlike most other Mediterranean regions, was characterized by a particularly high density of states that had comparable complexity, social structure, and culture.

A mentality of this kind is not at all surprising, considering how all empires need the propaganda boost and the ideological reinforcement that is provided by the one-sided exaltation of their conquest in history, art, and literature. Assyrian or Aztec texts and reliefs do not show more concern for the larger context of the conquest they exalt.[18] What is distinctive about Rome's case, however, is that the precipitously slanted narratives composed by the imperialists did not run their course and die with the empire that produced them, having exhausted their function. The hagiography of the Roman conquest instead became crystallized, constituting the foundation for most of the subsequent historiographic and popular discourse. Scholars simply accepted the conquerors' view of their deeds at face value. Even more, the memory of the Roman Empire went on to underpin ideologies of power in all the lands that had been part of it, from Britain to Syria, but even far beyond its reach, in places like northern Europe, Russia, or Ethiopia. As the name of Rome grew to become synonymous with past glory, many later empires (and aspiring ones) found in it a suitable, edifying role model to boost their self-confidence.

It was not only would-be emperors and other politicians that relied on a stock image of Rome. Intellectuals and thinkers as well tended to imagine the Roman period as a golden age, in cultural as much as in political terms. As Latin became the lingua franca of scholarship and international diplomacy, stylish writers like Cicero were adopted as required reading even at fairly elementary levels of education. As a result, their perspectives and assumptions about Rome's expansion were widely espoused and became pillars of medieval and Renaissance culture. The basic assumptions about their own conquest that Romans had were universally embraced and informed all later treatments of a historical process that was perceived as foundational for a wide range of states across Christendom and beyond. In this way, a dominant historical perspective was formed across different national and thematic discourses; it became so embedded that it was barely scratched by even the most radical recent deconstructive attempts. The past always tends to be a battleground of discordant tellings and retellings, but

[18] Brumfiel 2001; Gutiérrez, Terrenato, and Otto 2015.

most narratives about the Roman expansion shared some fundamental frameworks.

A role in such a remarkable process of historical petrification was undoubtedly played by the onset of Christianity. Because originally the spread of the new religion had been centered in Rome and had benefited from the infrastructure of the empire, it was natural to see the latter as a divinely ordained vehicle for the expedient propagation of the faith. When, in the late fourth century CE, Christianity became the state religion, this appeared to confirm definitively the teleological interpretation of Rome's expansionistic parable. Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–340) influentially theorized that the primary reason why the empire had emerged was to facilitate God's plan; he maintained that the emperor himself was divinely appointed and favored in his military triumphs.[19] Eusebius was building on a concept that had already been established by Church Fathers such as Melito of Sardis in the second century CE.[20] In this new worldview, an omnipotent god had rendered the conquest unstoppable to accomplish his plan, independently of the surrounding circumstances. Thus the credit that Romans had assigned to their own piety and ritual scruple was neatly transferred to another divine source of historical causation. Overall, the belief that the expansion was not a hard thing to explain was further reinforced.

Despite his avowed devotion to and admiration for Cicero, Augustine of Hippo (354–430) notoriously defined Rome as an "imperious" city which had imposed its yoke and its language by force. The motives animating the pagan Roman commanders were lustful and were typical of the city of Man, and yet at the same time they unknowingly prepared the ground for the city of God. But, as the venerable imperial institution started to teeter in the West, Augustine was keen to point out that its function had been exhausted and that, like all earthly, prideful human endeavors, it was doomed to fall apart in the end. When the Western Roman Empire finally collapsed, he made sense of the traumatic development arguing that Rome's ascent had simply provided an infrastructure for the establishment of the Roman church and that it had evidently now fulfilled its true purpose.[21] Augustine's harsh ethical and spiritual judgment on the empire stands at the head of a long, if at times subterranean, line of counternarratives that will present Rome as an amoral and insatiable war machine.

[19] Davis 1957: 40–65; Barnes 1981; Canning 1996: 4–5.
[20] Kannaday 2004: 50.
[21] Arbesmann 1954; Burns 1988: 103–16; Canning 1996: 39–43; Dyson 2005. The link between the Roman Empire and Christianity is still discussed by theologians today, e.g., Horsley 2002.

The political demise of Rome in the West, however, marked the beginning of its afterlife as a model, inspiration, predecessor and provider of legitimacy. If its function as a Christian vehicle had run its course, its stellar popularity as an ideological symbol had just begun. Early barbarian rulers made use of Roman imagery not only in their complex dealings with the Byzantines, but also locally as a way of making clear what their ambitions and pretensions were, especially whenever new kingdoms or dynasties were being created, or their boundaries were being expanded. In these frequent cases, Rome was referenced as the ultimate example of military prowess producing boundless expansion and an iron grip on the conquered lands. For instance, after his victories over the Visigoths, Frankish expansionist Clovis was acclaimed as "consul" and as "Augustus," and clearly relied on the model of Rome for his own state-building efforts.[22] Theoderic unashamedly proclaimed that the Roman emperors were his predecessors, while Bede endowed the kings of Kent with *imperium*.[23] Thus, right after the western empire disappeared, the states that had replaced it were quick to recruit its memory in support of their agendas, and, in so doing, they implicitly subscribed to the Romans' own view of the conquest and laid the foundation of a stock image of their expansion that would prove extremely long-lived and hard to challenge in the following centuries.

By the time the Carolingian monarchy was established, the imagery and vocabulary drawn from the Roman past was firmly embedded in official propaganda. Charlemagne explicitly likened his empire-building to that of the Romans, and claimed to be in fact restoring their glory. His court propaganda, as expressed by the prominent scholar and poet Alcuin (c. 735–804; nicknamed Flaccus, like Horace), dubbed the king Augustus and his capital Aix-la-Chapelle the "second Rome."[24] Charlemagne's actions spoke even louder: he notoriously came to Rome to be crowned by the pope, producing just one of countless episodes in the complex dialectic between the memory of the pagan emperors and the reality of the Roman pontiffs; significantly, his seal announced in no uncertain terms that a "renewal of the Roman Empire" was under way.[25] The theme of the renovation of past glories pervaded the Christian West for centuries and also included biblical kingdoms and other golden ages whose return was hailed or expected. But the influence exerted

[22] Hen 1993.
[23] Higham 1995; Arnold 2008.
[24] Folz 1953: 26–28. Another court poet, Modoin, nicknamed Naso, as Ovid, enthused that "Golden Rome renewed is once more reborn"; Burns 1988: 166.
[25] McKitterick 2006: 35–62. For the seals and other visual material, Garipzanov 2008. His grandson Charles the Bald had a similar seal, Canning 1996: 72.

by Rome remained unparalleled.[26] In the tenth century, the Saxon emperors Otto I and III assumed the appellative Augustus and claimed to rule the Romans as well as the Franks, once again proclaiming the rebirth of the old empire.[27] Elsewhere, the rulers of Britain also styled themselves emperors and Caesars, and so did the early kings of León in Spain.[28]

It is not only Roman concepts of monarchy that were current in medieval Europe. The Latin term for state (*res publica*) was employed in Carolingian parlance, and many other times afterwards, for instance to describe the transitional period between the emperors Henry II and Conrad II in the early eleventh century.[29] John of Salisbury (c. 1120–1180) defined the *res publica* as the common good in classic Ciceronian terms, within the context of a treatise in which the ancient Romans were characterized as greedy imperialists (even if some great leaders like Camillus or Caesar were praised).[30] Anti-monarchical governments like those existing in some communes in Italy were keen to reference the republican period, illustrating the richness and flexibility of the uses to which the Roman past could be put. Pisa, which in the twelfth century was a rising power in the Mediterranean, capitalized on its foundation as a Roman colony over a thousand years before. It portrayed itself as a reincarnation of Rome in its best republican days, with consuls carrying out successful naval expeditions as far as the eastern shore of the Mediterranean.[31] In Rome itself, a short-lived but very visible attempt to establish a republican commune was couched in terms of a re-founding of the original empire of the time of the conquest.[32] One of the demagogues involved, Arnold of Brescia, inflamed the populace with the example of the "ancient Romans, who made the whole world theirs through ripe counsel of the Senate and the courage of their youth."[33]

In the centuries after the western Roman Empire disappeared and the eastern one, with some exceptions, was reduced to defending unsuccessfully its shrinking frontiers, Rome did not lose any of its iconic value in

[26] Golden Rome, Rome head of the world, capital of the universe are only some of the enthusiastic expressions of admiration; Folz 1953: 39–42; Noble 2013.
[27] Benson 1982; Muldoon 1999: 25–34; Limbach 2008; Keller 2015. Similar devices were adopted by Henry II and III, Conrad II, Canning 1996: 76–77.
[28] Drögereit 1952; Mackay and Benaboud 1984.
[29] Nelson 1994; Canning 1996: 65–67, 78.
[30] O'Daly 2012. John also significantly introduced for the first time the metaphor, commonplace from the Renaissance onwards, of the dwarves standing of the shoulders of giants to indicate the relationship between ancient achievements and modern ones.
[31] Classen 1982; Wickham 1992. The Pisan consuls emphasized their emulation of great republican heroes like Cato or Atilius Regulus, Fisher 1966
[32] Benson 1982; O'Daly 2012
[33] Davis 1974: 30–31

the eyes of emerging rulers and their propagandists. On the contrary, it was pressed into active political service to provide legitimacy and sanction to expansionist attempts of all kinds. Clearly, by evoking the great empire of the past, the sense was conveyed that the new political entities would have the same fortune, durability, and prosperity. Military success and territorial conquest were closely associated with the use of Roman vocabulary and images, and over time this created a canonical image of Rome as the archetype of empire-building. Thus, at a very early formative stage of what would become western European culture, and in the absence of proper historical scholarship, a specific interpretation of Rome's expansion was nailed in place by an imposed analogy with contemporary political events. In their attempts to characterize positively their own expansionism, these medieval comparatists implicitly reinforced the idea that the Roman conquest had been a military endeavor in which the braver and the more powerful had prevailed over lesser peoples.[34] Therefore, a basic interpretative framework of this kind had already been firmly in place for centuries when the first humanists began their scholarly retelling of the Roman conquest. The early modern narratives were developed around that fundamental template. While other periods of antiquity, like Periclean Athens, were essentially rediscovered by Renaissance scholars after a long silence, the discourse on Rome never ceased even in times of minimal literacy and book-writing. In this way, crucial elements of what later elite Romans thought of the conquest seeped directly into our historiographical tradition and are still with us now.

The Beginnings of Historical Research

The judgment on the greediness of the Roman state that was passed in the twelfth century by John of Salisbury, however qualified and motivated by contemporary considerations, represents one of the earliest scholarly interpretations of the ascent of the great empire after those of the classical and early Christian periods. It ushered in an era of specialist discourse conducted at a high intellectual level and, at least ostensibly, less directly connected with the political propaganda of its time. From this period onwards, 'pure' researchers created a true intellectual debate on ancient Rome. Speculating from their libraries and university chairs, they were in theory much freer to

[34] Occasionally this was even openly stated: in his world chronicle, the Carolingian historian Freculph of Lisieux had praised Roman valor in the republican period, Smalley 1971: 167.