

I

‘IMPERIUM’: THE ROMAN HERITAGE

I. ‘IMPERIUM POPULI ROMANI’

In 184 B.C. the great Scipio had to answer the charge of having accepted bribes from King Antiochus. To make his guilt evident, the tribune Naevius convened an assembly of the people. Scipio frustrated the charge without refuting it. ‘If I remember rightly,’ so he addressed the citizens, ‘this is the anniversary of the great battle on African soil, in which I defeated Hannibal, the Carthaginian, the most determined enemy of your empire (*imperii vestri inimicissimum*) and gave you peace and victory. Let us not be ungrateful to the gods. Let us have done with that wretch and offer thanks to Jove.’ Then Scipio walked to the Capitol. He was followed by the crowd. The assembly broke up, and the tribune Naevius found himself deserted.

This dignified self-assertion by Scipio Africanus was long remembered in Rome.¹ It is memorable as well for what it tells of Scipio’s audience. Roman citizens had flocked to the spectacle of seeing a proud nobleman convicted of misdemeanour. They dropped the charge and hailed the defendant when he reminded them of Hannibal. But Scipio had not thought it enough to mention this formidable name. He had linked it with a lasting cause of the Roman people, the cause of their Imperium. This reminder had a share in his oratorical success. Scipio was certain of the fascination held by the words ‘imperium vestrum’. In our time the spell radiating from notions of ‘imperial’ power has changed from enthusiasm into abhorrence. But abhorring ‘imperialism’ means condemning just that superiority which then enchanted the Romans. The emotive significance of *imperium*, and of all the expressions derived from it, was born on the Roman Forum.

The tribune Naevius may well have anticipated Scipio’s deportment at the assembly, but the effect of the address took him by surprise. It was a new experience at that time. The Roman people at large was only beginning to realize the outstanding greatness of its power. Its leaders indeed had, some years before, after the victory over Syria at the latest, already

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declared this superiority to be an established fact. The treaty which shortly after that victory was imposed on the Aetolian federation opened with the promise that the Aetolians would respect 'the dominance and majesty of the Roman people'. The Greek formula *τὴν ἀρχὴν καὶ τὴν δυναστείαν τοῦ δήμου τῶν Ῥωμαίων* was later translated by Livy 'imperium maiestatemque populi Romani', and its original interpretation was scarcely very different.¹ But time was needed for the ordinary citizen to become fully aware of his new position in the world. According to Livy, the greatness as well as the recent origin of this position had to be impressed upon the legion in Thessaly by the consul Q. Marcius Philippus as late as the year 169. He assured the soldiers that the power of Macedonia, which they were to attack, could bear no comparison with that of their own people, which was already embracing all the world—'*vires populi Romani, iam terrarum orbem complectentis.*' After the fall of Macedonia, the disastrous results of a failure to accept the inevitable faced yet another small community. The Rhodians had tried to intervene in the conflict between Rome and Perseus, and some senators suggested a punitive campaign. Cato, however, opposed such a step. He asked his compatriots to understand that the Rhodians, in their attempt to preserve Macedonia, were only obeying the natural desire not to be left helpless, as slaves of an all-powerful *imperium* residing in Rome.²

These documents testify to the rise of *imperium* as a political watchword, following the rise of Roman supremacy in the Mediterranean. During the next generation the Hellenic world became forcibly reconciled to this ascendancy, and Polybius even set out to prove that it was the goal of history. To the less sophisticated Easterner the Romans were simply *οἱ ἡγούμενοι*,³ 'the leaders'. Tiberius Gracchus, trying to make the Roman masses conscious of social injustice, reminded them that they were always called 'the victorious people possessed of the world'.⁴ As this remark shows, an orator was not limited to the word *imperium*, though this was in fact the favourite word used to describe the situation. It was put to rhetorical use in a whole gamut of conventional expressions—*imperium orbis terrae, imperium populi Romani, nostrum imperium, vestrum imperium, hoc imperium*. The term *imperium populi Romani* was, indeed, not merely rhetorical. It defined the authority in the name of which Roman magistrates wielded power abroad. But like the other expressions it had a triumphant

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ring. Such a phrase could be emphatically enlarged: 'imperium orbis terrae, cui omnes gentes, reges, nationes partim vi, partim voluntate, concesserunt.'¹ But a succinct reference to 'this empire' could suffice to impress an audience—as young Cicero knew when, in defence of the countryman Sex. Roscius Amerinus, he bade the judges remember how the moral discipline of agriculture had made their forefathers become empire-builders—'rem publicam atque hoc imperium et populi Romani nomen auxerunt' ('increased the state, the empire, the renown of the Roman people').

The crime imputed to Roscius was not a political one.² Nevertheless, an appeal to the imperial feelings of the judges was not thought amiss. Ten years later (70 B.C.), Cicero produced the *Verrinae*. In them he wished to display not only oratory but also high-minded statesmanship. The dignity of the *imperium populi Romani* became his paramount subject. He saw it put to the test wherever a senator exposed himself to the judgement of allied or foreign peoples. If he was not respected by them, 'ubi erit imperii nomen et dignitas?' ('What will become of the repute and dignity of the *imperium*?') (iv, 25). The Sicilians were rightly indignant because they had experienced cruelty and inhumanity instead of what had been the Roman glory, 'the clemency and gentleness of our empire' (v, 150). People hanged or beaten or robbed—'quid est hoc? populi Romani imperium, populi Romani leges. . . ?' 'Is *this* the *imperium*, are *these* the laws of the Roman people?' (iii, 66). In a different context Cicero again, some years later (66 B.C.), entreated the citizens 'sociorum salutem una cum imperii vestri dignitate defendere'. On this occasion, the first time he was actively participating in high politics, he advocated the command—the military *imperium*—of Pompeius against Mithridates. Throughout the whole speech 'dignity' was linked with 'glory', with the greatness of 'hoc orbis terrae imperium' (*De Imperio Cn. Pompei*, II, 14, 53, etc.).

In both speeches Cicero presented himself, we might say, as a defender of imperial causes in the proper meaning of the word. But as he and his colleagues, friends, readers and audiences understood the expression, every public interest was or could be called an imperial interest. Up to the very end of his life, Cicero never tired of professing devotion to the *imperium populi Romani*. The speech exposing Catilina closes upon this

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note in the solemn invocation of Jupiter 'quem Statorem huius urbis atque imperii vere nominamus (I, 33). The last of the Catilinarian speeches directed to the immediate execution of the conspirators closes on the same note, and introduces a co-ordination of values which was to be remembered many centuries later: 'De imperio ac libertate, de salute Italiae, de universa re publica decernite diligenter.'¹ (He may not have been the first to pair *imperium* and *libertas*.) In his last and most daring oratorical performance, in his assault on Marcus Antonius, he knew he could not go wrong in proposing to the Senate that Decimus Brutus be declared the man who 'senatus auctoritatem populi que Romani libertatem imperiumque defendat'.²

It was customary to proclaim the honour, the greatness, the eternity of 'the Roman people's empire'. To Cicero, the concept implied paramount problems of political morality. In *De Officiis* and *De Re Publica* he expanded his views on these problems. It made a difference whether Rome was waging a war *de imperio*, or for its bare existence—'uter esset, non uter imperaret' (*De Officiis* I, 12, 38). Only by justice and wisdom had the Roman people been enabled to embrace the world within its *imperium* (*De Re Publica* III, 15, 24). The latter sentence purported to be a phrase uttered in a dialogue with Scipio when the empire of the Romans was young. But for Cicero political morality had not remained what it was in those early days, and once (*De Officiis* II, 8, 27) he nostalgically spoke of the time when 'imperium populi Romani beneficiis tenebatur, non iniuriis'. At that time, he added, one would have called its position a guardianship rather than an empire of the world—'patrocinium orbis terrae verius quam imperium'. With all his sincere reverence for the *imperium populi Romani*, Cicero was one of the first to suspect that such a concept might fall short of the higher demands of political ethics.

2. 'IMPERIUM ROMANUM'

Cicero's comments on the *imperium populi Romani* never swerved from the intrinsic meaning of 'imperium' to which he paid emphatic tribute in *De Legibus*—the legal power to enforce the law.³ Even if it was not qualified by such attributes as *nostrum*, *vestrum*, *hoc*, *populi Romani*, *orbis terrae*, it had not the qualities of a proper name. It was not understood to denote 'the Empire', the political entity of the *orbis* governed by the

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imperium populi Romani. Caesar, when rendering account to the Senate of the conquest of Gaul, kept to the same usage as Cicero. Explaining why he had decided to protect the Haedui and to fight Ariovistus, he professed to have been convinced that to evade this issue would have been shameful for him as well as for the state 'in tanto imperio populi Romani' ('when the Roman people possessed so much *imperium*') (I, 33, 2). He stated that his ultimatum to Ariovistus was based on the claim 'that the Empire of the Roman people existed as of right in Gaul' (I, 45, 3). He further claimed that this was the form of expression used by Helvetians, Britons and Germans, both when refusing and accepting Roman superiority (I, 17, 3; I8, 9; IV, 16, 4; 21, 5); thus the resentful Gauls nursed the ignominy of having become 'populi Romani imperio subiectos' ('subjected to the *imperium* of the Roman people') (v, 29, 4; VII, 1, 3).

However, both Cicero and Caesar knew of a different usage according to which 'imperium', without any attribute or circumstantial reference, could mean 'the Empire' as a territorial and administrative whole. The warnings of *De Re Publica* (III, 15, 24) concerning the moral foundation of the Roman people's world empire are a comment on a formula *finis imperii propagavit* ('he enlarged the bounds of the Empire') which adorned the monuments of great commanders. This epigraphic sentence was regarded as a proper recognition of their services by the republic.¹ Similarly, as a name which denotes the vast political unit, *imperium* occurs on a tablet commemorating a privilege given in 58 B.C. to the much harassed Isle of Delos. By decree of the Senate, financial immunity was restored to the Delians 'imperio amplificato, pace per orbem terrarum parta'.² The brief reference to 'enlarged Empire' recalls the equally concise name given to the Romans on Greek monuments from as early as about 130 B.C.: οἱ ἡγούμενοι. In marked contrast to the usage of Cicero and his friends as well as to that which he himself employed in his ceremonial style, Caesar confirmed in a grammatical treatise that *imperium* might designate the one Empire, and he also adopted this language in a private missive during the Civil War.³

As long as republican institutions still had a life of their own, it would have been awkward to refer so abruptly to 'the Empire' in addresses to senatorial or popular assemblies. For here the term *imperium*, devoid of explanatory attributes, constantly served a quite different purpose. In

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the language of public law the word denoted the power bestowed by the people on the highest magistrates entrusted with enforcing authority, the consuls, proconsuls, praetors, propraeors, dictators, or else it referred to supreme military commands arranged for special campaigns.¹ That a Roman was 'cum imperio' meant that he had become invested with one of the highest public responsibilities.² Now it was the appointment to these *imperia*, or the conduct of citizens entrusted with them, which most frequently made the word *imperium* a topic of debate. There could scarcely be a subject of public oratory more momentous than the granting of *imperium* in this sense of the word. It was this that constituted the real issue in many of those speeches which paid emphatic homage to the *imperium populi Romani*, and it was—unless the immediate context unmistakably referred to the broader concept—this issue on which the speaker was understood to dwell whenever he discussed *imperium* without implementing the word by any attribute.³ He was not expected to use the style of the inscriptions.

However, the differentiation was in practice bound up with the life of the Republic. It ceased to be important when Cicero had paid with his life for his last attempt to reserve the control of the highest *imperia* to the legal authorities of the *imperium orbis*, the Senate and the People. Speeches in the Senate and on the Forum were no longer decisive in such matters of state after the noble families of Rome had been humiliated by the triumvirs.

In 38 B.C. Caesar Octavianus had made his position paramount in Rome and the West. He forthwith claimed that from *divus* Julius, his adoptive father, he had inherited the praenomen *imperator*, though this word originally was, and for some time still remained, a military title conferred by acclamation on a high-ranking commander after victory. Seven years later, after Actium, the whole *imperium orbis* was under his sway. In 27 B.C. he had his position sanctioned by the Senate in the form of a proconsular *imperium*, valid for ten years and extending over a large territory. His incomparable position was ceremonially confirmed by the new name of *Augustus*. Four years later, his proconsular *imperium* was declared to be permanent and to include all the provinces.

Augustus was anxious to make it clear that his supreme dignity did not affect the foundations of the Republic.⁴ Again and again he proclaimed

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that the *imperium orbis terrarum* remained *imperium populi Romani*, and he affirmed that his praenomen *imperator* would not impair this legal principle. To avoid any ambiguity, he had, when this name was submitted to senatorial recognition, explicitly laid down that it should not be hereditary.¹ His achievements in war and peace were services rendered to the Roman people and its *imperium*. This was ceremonially declared by decrees and inscriptions which immortalized his personal glories, including the solemn account which he wrote for his own monument.²

But his professions of loyalty to the old imperial cause were not solely meant to demonstrate the loyalty of the *princeps* to the constitution of the republic. They were also lessons in public spirit addressed to the people at large. They were in keeping with the programme of social education on which Augustus was intent. After the havoc and humiliation wreaked upon the republican aristocracy, a new generation was to be reared in a new conception of serving the common cause. The dominant idea was that, under the guidance of the *princeps*, the ancestral traditions of Rome should come into their own again. They were to be rejuvenated by the observance of archaic rites; they were to effect the purification of public morals. A third aspect of the educational programme related to imperial matters. To decide on them had now devolved on the *princeps*. The patriot was to believe in his wisdom and to serve him faithfully in the army and in provincial administration. And while observing this discipline, the citizen was to cherish the conviction that he was doing nothing but serve the old imperial cause.

This cause was no longer to be debased by such personal ambitions as had marred the last decades of the republic. Had not Cicero already inveighed against their pernicious influence? The imperial cause was to be sincerely interpreted as a sacred vocation. This vocation had descended upon Rome when the gods sent Aeneas and Romulus there. It had been well known under the kings. It had by hard effort been brought to fulfilment in the better days of the Republic. It was now under the custody of Augustus and his house. Roman world government was to be visualized as something superhuman and as participating in the divine character of the *urbs Roma* itself.

The word *imperium* was invested with this august character. Its once most popular application, *imperium populi Romani*, was ceremonially

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accepted by the *princeps*. However, for the citizen who followed his lead, this phrase was no longer felt to be the form most appropriate for expressing civic devotion. The imperial cause was most forcefully proclaimed when simply called the dominance, the 'imperium'. This word, simple and unadorned, had served a similar purpose already on republican monuments. It was now profusely used as a literary watchword. Side by side with it arose a second version of symbolic significance. This version correlated the personality of the Empire with that of the deified city. It read: Imperium Romanum.

In the early years of the principate, historical and poetical writings were harnessed to the educational aims of Augustus. Maecenas mediated between the policies of the court and the artistic ambitions of the *literati*.¹ He gave guidance to Horace, Virgil and Livy. The *Carmina*, the *Aeneis* and the introductory sections of the books *Ab Urbe Condita* all include passages in which the word *imperium* has the meaning of 'the Empire' and has the function of reminding the Romans of its greatness and the duties it implies. The poets, at the same time, use it to express homage to Augustus and his house.

Horace, in his invitation to celebrate the downfall of Egypt, recalls the days of anxiety when Cleopatra 'Capitolio . . . ruinas, funus et imperio parabat' ('was plotting to lay the Capitol in ruins, and bring death to our *imperium*') (I, 37). Not long after, his verses expressed concern for the future of the *imperium*; it could not be thought safe unless Caesar remained alive to watch over it and to prevent its ruin.² A few years later, he wrote the poetic sermon on civic self-sacrifice, exemplified in the martyrdom of Regulus (III, 5), and the prayer to the Fortuna of Antium (I, 35). Both poems refer to new wars fought by Augustus beyond the frontiers. The first looks forward triumphantly to the aggrandizement of the Empire, which will result from the submission of Britain and Parthia, and will make Augustus divine. The second is again concerned with the immeasurable importance of Caesar's preservation. He must come home safely with his formidable army of young Romans. 'The column' must stand lest the people be shattered by the terror of war, 'and the Empire go to pieces' (I, 35, 13–16, 29–32). When Horace, long after, added a fourth book to the *Carmina*, he felt more assured of the future. He had the collection finished with a hymn on 'The Age of Caesar'.

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‘Tua, Caesar, aetas’ has seen the gates of Janus closed, and has restored the *veteres artes* from which have sprung the name of Latium, the vigour of Italy,

... fama que et imperi
 porrecta maiestas ad ortum
 solis . . . (IV, 15, 13–15)

(‘the glory and majesty of empire, spread out to the rising of the sun’).

Virgil opens his epic with divine prophecy, assuring the Trojan refugees that from them will descend a people destined for boundless expansion and infinite life, and endowed with ‘*imperium sine fine*’, but he hastens to add that Caesar will be the man ‘*imperium Oceano, famam qui terminet astris*’ (I, 278, 290). When later on (VI, 801) he exhorts the Romans ‘*regere imperio populos*’, he is not appealing to a collective lust of conquest but reminding the individual Roman of his duty to serve ‘the Empire’. Livy, in his Preface, expresses anxieties even more sombre than those of the early Horace concerning the moral adequacy of his contemporaries to meet their imperial duties. The nations of the world still stand in awe of the Romans. They have resigned themselves to the *imperium*. But the purpose of the historian must be to show the contrast between the Romans of yore and those of the latest generations. He must inquire about ‘the ways of life and public conduct, the leaders and the arts of peace and war by which the Empire was founded and made great’. He must severely scrutinize the moral decline of later ages. For there is every reason to doubt whether the present generation, fallen into unbearable vices, is equal to the task of applying the necessary remedies.¹ Livy does not name the man whose wisdom is to devise these remedies. But he soon proclaims the third of the ancient kings, Ancus Marcius, as the virtual founder of the Empire; by his victory over Veii and the foundation of Ostia he has created ‘*usque ad mare imperium prolatum*’ (‘an *imperium* extending as far as the sea’) (I, 33, 8). He then gives a minute account of the portents which under Tarquinius Superbus saved the Sanctuary of Terminus, the god protecting the frontiers, on Mount Tarpeius. These portents undoubtedly pointed to ‘*tanti imperii molem*’ (‘so vast an extent of *imperium*’) and made clear that this hill would be the stronghold of the Empire (I, 55, 3–6).

‘*Imperii . . . deumque locus*’, Rome was called by Ovid (*Tristia*, I, 5, 70).

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By his time the other formula, which associated Rome and the Empire in one unified concept, had already made headway. Side by side with *imperium*, the fuller formula 'Imperium Romanum' is emphatically used by Livy and in the forensic examples of the elder Seneca. It also adorns the cenotaph of the emperor's grandson in Pisa, where Augustus is called 'custos imperi Romani'.¹ But the author who told posterity most explicitly what Imperium Romanum meant to the Augustan age was a second-rate follower of its luminaries, Valerius Maximus. The message celebrated by Horace in the sustained metres of Odes III 1 to 6 was, for the benefit of the age of Tiberius, spun out by Valerius into a vast and systematic collection of edifying anecdotes. His 'Memorable Deeds and Sayings' is a textbook of civic virtues taught by examples. He wished youth to be imbued with the virile morality of the Romans of old. And as he took his examples from Livy, so he always returned to the question put in the preface of the books *Ab Urbe Condita*. What were the moral qualities that made the Empire grow and establish itself permanently? To him it was always 'Imperium Romanum' or 'Romanum Imperium'.

This Empire, he believed, was endowed with a spirit of its own which was destined for eternity. To the challenge of danger, this spirit answered in its indomitable and confident will to survive, 'contusus et aeger' ('buffeted and sick'). Accordingly, 'the noblest ornament of the Imperium Romanum and the buttress of its strength is the tenacious tie of military discipline'. Through this stubborn discipline the Roman Empire had subdued Italy. As Ancus Marcius had been to Livy, so Tullus Hostilius was to Valerius the archaic king, who showed the Empire the way to aggrandizement. It was only in its early days that the Imperium Romanum was forced to expand in order to survive. Therefore Scipio Africanus did wisely when he ordered men to pray no longer for the growth of Roman power but for its preservation. However, the same Scipio took pride in the poem of Ennius, which celebrated his victories. This literary monument, Scipio was satisfied, would preserve his memory from oblivion for as long as the Roman Empire flourished, as long as Italy's foot was set on the neck of Africa and the Capitoline citadel was the summit of the *orbis terrarum*. A victory achieved in the service of the Roman Empire was an honour even to the vanquished; therefore L. Paulus acted gracefully when he decorated himself with the badges of the