CHAPTER ONE

Ideas of empire

> Yet the visible king may also be a true one, some day, if ever day comes when he will estimate his dominion by the *force* of it, – not the geographical boundaries. It matters very little whether Trent cuts you a cantel out here, or Rhine rounds you a castle less there. But it does matter to you, king of men, whether you can verily say to this man, 'Go,' and he goeth; and to another, 'Come,' and he cometh.
>
> John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (1871), §44.

This book is a search for the unattainable, for the notion or notions that the Romans had of their empire as their power spread beyond the boundaries of the Italian peninsula in the third and second centuries BC down to the time, in the midst of the second century AD, when it seemed to have acquired a permanent hold over southern and western Europe and its attendant islands, Asia Minor and what we now call the Middle East, and the northern strip of the African continent. The problems with this search are twofold, one of which makes the process difficult and the second apparently impossible. Both must be stated at the outset, because it is these two factors which shape the process of this investigation and its possible outcome.

I

The first is the notion of 'empire' itself. The idea of what an empire consists of is simple. Michael Doyle states the matter with admirable concision: empires are relationships of political control over the effective sovereignty of other political societies.[1] However, in actuality empires are immensely varied in the way that political control is achieved and exercised. These variations are what distinguish one empire from another, and each must be examined in its own terms, to avoid the danger of inappropriate transfer of notions of empire from one society to another. A recent volume, gathering together perspectives from across the world from ancient times to the early modern era, emphasises this diversity.[2] The self-evident differences between the Persian and the Athenian empires in the fifth century BC, based on quite different forms of military and organisational control, and between either of these and the Portuguese and Spanish empires of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with their various commercial and religious motivations, or the colonial empires of Britain and France in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, not to mention the military rather than territorial control which marked the imperial policies of the United States in the later twentieth, make the same point at a general level. If, as Doyle defines it, imperialism is the process of establishing and maintaining an empire,[3] the nature of any particular example of imperialism will be as different from others as the resulting empires are different.

This combination of simplicity and complexity in the notion of empire has led modern social scientists to attempt the construction of what might be called taxonomies of empire. One of the most common distinguishes between 'formal' and 'informal' rule, the former

[1] Doyle (1986), 19. [2] Alcock, D'Altroy, Morrison and Sinopoli (2001).
[3] Doyle (1986), 19. For a historian's approach to the theory of empires, see also Maier (2006).

being rule by annexation and government by colonial governors supported by troops from the imperial state and local collaborators, the latter being control by manipulation of collaborating elites over the domestic and external policies of legally independent regimes.[4] The language of 'formal' and 'informal' empire is not altogether helpful, suggesting as it does two sets of ways of exercising imperial power which are mutually exclusive, whereas (as the development of Roman imperial power illustrates) the two sets often coexist. A more useful distinction on similar lines is that between 'power by conquest' and 'power as possession', where the distinction is based on the relationship of the state exercising imperial power to the territory of the conquered and controlled communities, that is, between military conquest *simpliciter* and administrative control.[5] This distinction seems to fit well with pre-industrial empires, and particularly with those of the ancient world.[6] Other elements which might also be included in the construction of a taxonomy are the extent and nature of commercial and other economic exploitation and of the institutional bureaucratisation of the mechanisms of government used by the imperial state. The level to which the subject states and their citizens are incorporated within the empire would provide another indicator.

Such an approach provides a way in which empires from different parts of the world and different periods can be compared, but it also allows a method of charting the development of individual imperial states. The changes in the notion and style of empire are not confined to differences between empires but also occur within the history of a

[4] Doyle (1986), 30–47 and 135.

[5] Mann (1986), 533–8; and 254–60, where he identifies Rome as the first territorial empire, having developed from the earlier 'dominating' model from around 100 BC. Compare the distinction between 'having an empire' and 'being an empire' (Maier (2006), 5–6).

[6] See Ma (1999), 106–7.

single group's exercise of power over others; and this is particularly the case when such exercise of power takes place across a long period. This is very much the case with the Roman Empire. In terms of the taxonomy suggested above, the extension of Roman control over Italy in the fourth century BC shows a move from pure 'power-as-possession' (exemplified by the incorporation of the territory of the city of Veii into that of Rome, the *ager Romanus*, after the capture of Veii in 396) to an admixture of 'power-by-conquest' on a more 'informal' level with the restructuring of the Latin league after 338, whereby some former allies were incorporated, some left as legally independent though in practice bound by treaties to provide troops and yet others given a partial citizenship which imposed the burdens of incorporation into the Roman state without the concomitant political rights. This mosaic of imperial modes provided Rome with the control over its neighbours and the military manpower it needed to undertake the subjugation of the rest of Italy by the middle of the third century.[7] Given the adaptability of structure that the Romans displayed in the conquest of Italy, it is only to be expected that there were changes in the way the empire was seen and managed as it grew to encompass the Mediterranean world in the late third and second centuries BC and to go beyond, into more northerly parts of Europe and east and south into Asia and north Africa, in the first centuries BC and AD. The question that needs to be addressed is not, 'What was the Roman Empire like?', but rather, 'How did the empire change in the long period of its overseas expansion?', or even, 'What were the Roman empires like?'

II

Depicting the Roman Empire, even in general terms, is then a complex and difficult business, but the project of this book involves a

[7] See, for a masterly summary of this period, Cornell (1995), chs. 12 and 14.

second question which is still more problematic: what did the Romans think they were doing as their power changed and expanded, and were they aware of those changes? There have, of course, been many notable and distinguished attempts over the past century and a half to delineate the nature of Roman imperialism. Theodor Mommsen, in a few seminal sentences, argued that, at least in the first half of the second century BC, when Roman armies were withdrawn from Greece and Asia Minor after the completion of successful wars, Rome's apparent empire-building was the result of a policy of misguided self-defence against largely imaginary threats to its own security.[8] In the 1970s scholars such as Dahlheim[9] and, especially, Harris[10] presented a more brutal picture of Roman militarism and greed, with the senate being determined, for reasons of greed and military power, to annex any territory it could. There are problems with such an approach, particularly with the notion of 'annexation', which will be examined below,[11] but its major attraction is also its greatest demerit, in that it attempts to give a coherent account of what the Romans did over a long period. As we have seen, it is at least as likely that Roman ideas of imperialism, and indeed of empire, were different in the late republic as compared with the middle republic, and still more so by the time of Augustus and his successors.[12] This has been brought out with more subtlety and precision in more recent studies,[13] but relatively little has been written on what the Romans thought their empire was as opposed to what they did to create it.[14]

[8] Mommsen (1912), 699. For the history of this idea and its relation to the context of those who held and developed it, see Linderski (1984).
[9] Dahlheim (1977). [10] Harris (1979). [11] See below, pp. 23–5.
[12] One such instance is Harris' argument that the use of the word *imperium* in the prayers of the censors (Val. Max. 4.1.10) and at the *ludi saeculares* showed that the increase of empire was a very early and continuing wish. See below, p. 152.
[13] So Nicolet (1988) and (1991); Whittaker (1994); Kallet-Marx (1995); Woolf (1998).
[14] An obvious and notable exception is the work of Peter Brunt (Brunt (1978) and (1990), 433–80).

The reasons for the lack of such attention to the ideas of the Romans are reasonably clear. The attention of scholars working on imperialism in recent years has been to a large extent on the experience of those who were on the periphery, those, that is to say, who suffered empire rather than those who made and controlled it, and this has been reflected also in work on Roman imperialism. This book is confessedly Romanocentric, and to that extent out of fashion. Worse still, it will attempt to discover what the ideas and intentions of the Roman ruling classes were with regard to their empire over more than three hundred years. Having been told by a great Roman historian when I was a research student that there were only two figures from antiquity about whose intentions it was justifiable to write, and that they were Cicero and St Augustine,[15] I suspect that such a project requires explanation.

The warning I was given decades ago was against attributing to individuals in the ancient world mental states for which we had no, or radically insufficient evidence. In a situation in which such evidence consists of literary survivals, invariably composed with an audience and an agenda in mind, or visual artistic and archaeological material, which is just as hard to interpret, discussions of the intentions of, say, Hannibal or Gaius Gracchus or the emperor Augustus are fraught with difficulty to the extent of being incapable of accurate resolution. In some ways this problem might seem to be exacerbated when the object of the investigation is not the notions of one person but of a large and largely unidentifiable group. Hence the apparent impossibility of this project, referred to at the beginning of this chapter. There is, however, a greater chance of identifying general attitudes, what might be described as the 'mental wallpaper' of a section of a society, which are not specifically argued about in

[15] A remark (somewhat ironically, in view of the previous footnote) of Peter Brunt.

our sources precisely because they are taken for granted by those who wrote or spoke at the time. Such paradigms have been neatly described as 'short-hand for the assumptions we don't get round to articulating'.[16] It is just such a paradigm, and the shifts and changes in its composition, that I will attempt to identify in the chapters which follow.

Of course, there are problems involved in discovering such 'mental wallpapers' for those in the ancient world, not least that the evidence we have comes from individual writers whose work happens to have survived and each of whom has his own set of attitudes, which may or may not be congruent with any generally held paradigm. To minimise the difficulties, three strategies are employed in what follows. First, so far as is possible all the instances of literary uses of the words which are to be examined have been collected and considered as evidence for the period in which they were written, rather than that to which the writer refers; second, due attention has been paid to the particularities of individual writers by comparison with others of the period, and, where appropriate, with evidence from Greek authors and from epigraphic material; and third, the formal legal and constitutional structures through which imperial power was deployed and exercised have been surveyed, to provide a further comparator with the evidence of the language of the literary sources. By these means, it is hoped that a better understanding of the ideas of the Roman ruling classes can be gained across the period that is being examined.

III

It is the contention of this book that, in order to understand Roman imperialism and the Roman Empire, it is necessary to grasp what the

[16] A remark of Professor Jocelyn Bell Burnell, then Professor of Physics at the Open University, on *Start the Week*, BBC Radio 4, 22 September 1997.

Romans thought they were doing as well as what they did. The best, perhaps the only way of doing this is to examine the language that they used to describe that empire. One important element within this set of ideas is the notion of empire as a territorial entity, and whether (and when) the Romans saw the extension of their power in terms of acquiring and controlling landmasses: in terms of the taxonomy outlined above, the disjunction is between 'power by conquest' and 'power as possession', and the ways in which these two notions related to one another. The focus in this work will for this reason be on the ideas expressed by the words *imperium* and *provincia*. Both were fundamental to the processes whereby the Roman state extended its military and political power in the third and second centuries BC, when *imperium* seems to mean essentially the power held by an official of the city of Rome, and *provincia* the responsibility given to a holder of *imperium*,[17] yet both of them came to have geographical significances by the first century AD.[18] The conservatism of the Roman political vocabulary across long periods of its history allows changes in usage and application of these words to be traced, not only in formal, official contexts but also in more discursive and rhetorical passages. Of course, such an investigation is faced with the problems of polysemy, for as a word gains additional meanings and applications it does not necessarily lose the old ones; but these problems are also at least part of the answer, illustrating the processes of evolution which characterise Roman political thought. To deal with the question of the meaning

[17] See below, chapter 2. Bertrand (1989) argues that *provincia* did have a geographical sense from the beginning, but this seems to me not to be supported by the earliest evidence (see below, ch. 2, especially p. 61). For the temporal disjunction between an idea or practice and the appearance of a word for it, compare Daube (1994).

[18] It is not surprising, given the etymological connection, that these words are, often unthinkingly, translated as 'empire' and 'province', even when the context suggests 'power' or 'responsibility'.

and import of particular uses, close attention must be paid to the content and context of the passages in which the words are used. Through a careful consideration of such uses, the life-history of the words and the ideas that they carried through this crucial period of the growth and development of the Roman Empire will be traced.[19]

The intention of this book is to explore, through the growth in the set of meanings which attached in particular to these two words, the presuppositions which lay behind the development of Rome's overseas empire from the third century BC to the first century AD, and the continuities and discontinuities within those presuppositions. *Imperium*, which at the start of the period means 'power' in an abstract sense and usually with an individual, personal application, acquires the meaning of an extent of territory; and *provincia*, which begins as the task or responsibility of a holder of *imperium* comes to mean an area within the empire with a defined set of administrative norms. The questions which the following chapters attempt to answer are how this came about, and how the changes in patterns of thought, which these shifts in language reveal, affected and reflected the development of the Roman Empire.

[19] On the biographical pattern of this book, see further below, pp. 57–8 and p. 182.

CHAPTER TWO

The beginnings: Hannibal to Sulla

It would be a bold historian who attempted to fix a date for the beginnings of Roman imperialism, to say nothing of a Roman empire. From the earliest traces we have within the historical record of Rome as a functioning community, in the sixth century BC, the city's political institutions were based on the structures of its army; and, in just over a century from the capture of Veii in 396, Roman control spread across the whole of the Italian peninsula.[1] Moreover there can be no doubt that Roman society throughout this time was decidedly military, and perhaps even militarist, in character.[2] This could well be described as imperialism, and Rome's patchwork of military alliances and settlements as an empire. Although traditionally the period of Roman imperialism is reckoned to have begun with its expansion overseas, and thus with the first war against the Carthaginians (264–241 BC), there are obvious continuities between the extension of control over Italy and the move into Sicily, which brought Rome face to face with Carthage, as indeed there are between the Italian conquest and the wars for dominance over the Latin league which preceded it.

[1] See the excellent account of the period in Cornell (1995), especially chs. 8, 12 and 14.
[2] See Harris (1979), ch. 1.