

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-84062-0 - Peoples of the Roman World
Mary T. Boatwright
Excerpt
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CHAPTER 1

ROME AND ITS
PEOPLES



Introduction

Although now many may consider Rome and the Romans as a distinct, single-minded culture, Rome always encompassed many peoples and lands. Cicero called Rome the *populus Romanus omnium gentium victor*, a phrase that well expresses Rome's growth and inherent tensions: the Latin can mean both "the Roman people triumphant over all the races" and "the victorious Roman people of all races" (Cicero, *On the Orator* 2.76; 55 BCE). One of the Romans' most characteristic traits was their drive to conquer and incorporate others. Julius Caesar, for example, is supposed to have proclaimed to his lieutenants in 58 BCE:

[O]ur ancestors made Rome so great ... by bringing their minds to venture readily all that they ought to do, and their bodies to work out eagerly all the plans they had determined upon; by risking their own possessions as if they belonged to others, but acquiring readily the possessions of their neighbors as their own.... They thought that happiness was nothing else than doing their duty, and they held that misfortune was nothing else than resting inactive. It was in consequence of these principles, therefore, that those men, who were in the beginning very few and dwelt in a city at first as small as any, conquered the Latins, subdued the Sabines, mastered the Etruscans ... [and] subjugated the whole land south of the Alps.... The later Romans, likewise, and our own fathers imitated them, not satisfied with what they had inherited but regarding sloth as their sure destruction and hardship as their certain safety. They feared that if their treasures were not increased the goods would waste away of themselves and wear out with age, and they themselves were ashamed after receiving so rich a heritage to add nothing to

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it; accordingly they effected much greater and more numerous conquests. (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 38.37–38, written 220s CE; adapted from Loeb translation)

Caesar and other Romans were exceptionally successful conquerors, and at its peak in the second century CE, “Rome” extended from northern Britain to Mesopotamia, and from the Rhine and Danube rivers to the upper reaches of the Nile. Those inhabiting this expansive territory numbered some 60 million at Rome’s acme in the second century CE, and they included many different peoples and cultures (Fig. 1).

This book examines five of these groups, exploring the tension between assimilation and distinctiveness in Rome’s expanding populace, as well as the transformations brought to Rome by its multicultural nature. The five groups I have chosen – “northerners,” Greeks, Egyptians, Jews, and Christians – were distinct within the Roman world. Yet all were, or became, Romans, and all contributed inestimably to Roman history. As we shall see in this book, the criteria for their distinctiveness included culture, language, religion, physical features, customs, and ethnicity; also, the groups were not unitary within themselves. I do not explore Rome’s interactions with Sabines, Samnites, Etruscans, and other Italic peoples, although claims based on these ethnic groups figured in Republican history. Other groups important during the Empire could also be investigated fruitfully: for instance, Africans and blacks within the Roman world have been the subject of important studies. But the groups I examine here offer relatively full and accessible evidence that overlaps and differs in interesting ways. The following chapters thus illuminate aspects of Rome’s social, cultural, religious, and political history even while exploring the value, and the limitations, of diverse types of Roman evidence. My primary purpose is not to discern what constituted “Romanness” (or *Romanitas*, to use a word now sometimes found in scholarship), or how non-Romans “became Roman,” a phenomenon often termed “Romanization.” Rather, I examine Roman concepts and tolerance of community and difference in regard to five groups, the changing relationships these groups had with Rome (and other groups)

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1. Map of the Roman world at its height in the second century CE, noting lands, rivers, and most provinces of the time, as well as cities and sites mentioned in the text. Map © 2011, Ancient World Mapping Center (www.unc.edu/awmc). Used by permission.

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over time, and some reciprocal effects of the incorporation of these groups into Rome's world.

**Diversity from Rome's Beginnings,
 One of Rome's Characteristics**

Romans emphasized their varied origins even though often speaking about "the Romans" or "the Roman populace" as though it were homogeneous, as does Cicero in our opening quotation. Their founding legends, dynamic throughout Rome's history, were memorably elaborated in literature and the visual arts during the Augustan period. Vergil, Livy, and others are clear that Aeneas, the ancestor of all Romans and one of the few Trojans to survive the epic Trojan War, emigrated to Italy, where he overcame Latin peoples to establish himself in Latium. Aeneas' descendant Romulus, founder of the city of Rome and its first king in the eighth century BCE, created an "asylum" on the Capitoline Hill to enroll Italian and other immigrants in his new state. In need of citizen children for the new Rome, Romulus also masterminded the violent seizure of women from the neighboring Sabine tribe, joining Sabines to Romans to further enlarge the citizen base.

Roman authors show both negative and positive reactions to the diversity of the Romans. In *On Behalf of Balbus* (chap. 31; 56 BCE), Cicero claims that what was paramount in founding Rome's empire and increasing the reputation of the Roman people was Romulus' example of enlarging the state by taking in former enemies. In the Augustan era, on the other hand, Dionysius of Halicarnassus criticized the Romans for their "mongrel" nature, emphasizing that criminals, hoodlums, and other undesirables were among Romulus' new citizens (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 2.15.4). In the second century CE, the orator Aelius Aristides positively valued Rome's heterogeneity as a reflection of meritocracy. (The contrasting opinions of these last two authors, both from Rome's eastern provinces and writing in Greek for an educated, Greek-speaking audience in the Roman world, warn us against

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typecasting any of our groups.) Still other authors, like Pliny the Elder from northern Italy, downplayed Rome's multiculturalism in relation to a sweeping glorification of Roman assimilation. Pliny praises Italy as:

At one and the same time the foster child and parent of all the lands, chosen by the power of the gods ... to gather together scattered realms and soften their customs, to unite the discordant wild tongues of so many peoples (*populi*) into a common speech for communication, and to give civilization (*humanitas*) to mankind, and, in short, to become the one homeland of all the peoples (*gentes*) in the entire world. (*Natural History* 3.39; published ca. 77–79 CE)

Rome's assimilation of various peoples was never uncontested or uncomplicated. Some groups, such as various tribes of the Britons, rose up against their Roman conquerors, and the Jews were particularly rebellious, breaking out in three dangerous revolts from 66 to 135 CE. Languages other than Latin were in use throughout Roman territories, and even in Rome itself. Greek was a special case, for Romans considered Greek the main language of civilization and literature. From the third century BCE through the third century CE those in Rome's elite ranks knew it, and in the Roman world it was employed equally with Latin as an administrative language. Jews and Egyptians retained or even developed distinct customs and rites despite their incorporation into the Roman empire, and the elite of both groups used Greek for their writings.

Many of the groups we discuss in this book – with the notable exception of the Christians – apparently retained their original cults and religious beliefs even while participating in Roman public religion, and the monotheistic Jews frequently worked out compromises with their imperial Roman rulers. Individuals and groups, it seems, could take on Roman “civilization” (Pliny's *humanitas*) without losing a primary identity. A non-Christian speaker in Minucius Felix's *Octavius*, a Christian dialogue written in the late second or early third century, emphasizes Rome's acceptance of other religions:

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Hence it is that throughout the wide [Roman] empire, provinces, and towns, we see each people having its own individual rites and worshipping its local gods, the Eleusinians Ceres, the Phrygians the Great Mother, the Epidaurians Aesculapius, the Chaldaeans Bel, the Syrians Astarte, the Taurians Diana, the Gauls Mercury, the Romans all of these.... Thus [the Romans'] power and authority has occupied the scope of the whole earth, thus their empire has expanded beyond the routes of the sun and the limits of the Ocean itself, while they exercise religious virtue even in arms ... while everywhere they seek out the gods of others and make them their own, while they build altars even to unknown divinities.... Thus, in that they take on for themselves the sacred institutions of all peoples (*gentes*), they also deserve their dominion. (Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 6.1–3)

In the preceding quotations, as in others in this book, diversity is considered fundamental to Rome and the Romans. This contrasts an important definition of “Greekness” that was articulated in the 430s BCE by the influential Greek historian Herodotus. In Herodotus’ *Histories*, which investigated the Persian Wars and underlying Greek and Persian antagonism, the Athenians, Spartans, and other Greeks are said to share a certain “Greekness” because of their shared blood (i.e., a common descent), shared language, shared way of life, and shared religious practices (*Histories* 8.144.2). Such commonalities did not hold for the Romans, whose phenomenal geopolitical growth instead forced them to continually reassess who and what they were.

**The Growth of Rome, Roman Provinces,
and Roman Citizenship**

Throughout Rome’s history many, if not most, of those identified with Rome were of non-Roman origin even if they held Roman citizenship; furthermore, from the establishment of Rome’s Republic at the end

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of the sixth century BCE until the early third century CE, those who enjoyed full Roman citizenship comprised at most perhaps only half of those associated with Rome, and usually much less. These facts about Rome's population are due to many phenomena, most obviously its prodigious growth. Rome's expansion, especially remarkable during the Republic when it grew from a small city-state on the seven hills of Rome to encompass almost all of the lands around the Mediterranean, depended on its ability to field armies continuously. Engaging yearly in hostilities ever farther from the city, the Romans developed a system of alliances that ensured copious manpower under the command of Roman generals. The conquered were often incorporated into Rome's army – by the end of the Republic as auxiliary or allied troops – and then eventually into the Roman state. Elaborate public rituals and justification of wars as defensive ones undertaken for their mutual protection encouraged the rapport of Romans and their comrades-in-arms, the Italian allies. The Social War of 91–88/87 BCE resulted in the enrollment of the Italian allies as Roman citizens. Also, during the late Republic (ending at 27 BCE), and continuing throughout the Empire, generals and emperors granted Roman citizenship to individuals and groups in return for anticipated and rendered services, particularly military and political ones. By the second century CE, Rome had devised ways to grant citizenship automatically to those who had served as auxiliary soldiers or as local magistrates, that is to say, had assumed roles considered useful to the growth and perpetuation of the state.

But such grants of Roman citizenship were relatively rare and often begrudged until the third century CE. Augustus is reported to have refused his wife Livia when she asked him to grant a certain Gallic man Roman citizenship. He gave the man tax-exempt status instead, stating that he would more readily allow money to be taken from the treasury than the honor of Roman citizenship to be made common (Suetonius, *Life of Augustus* 40.3). Until 212 CE, most people in Rome's provinces were not Roman citizens.

And Rome's provinces were many and widespread. The provincial system enlarged Rome's territory and control of peoples both outside

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and within the northern Italian peninsula, starting with the two provinces of Sicily and Sardinia/Corsica (227 BCE), continuing with the provinces of Closer and Farther Spain, Macedonia, and other provinces in the eastern Mediterranean in the second century BCE, and intensifying after about 100 BCE. Successful wars enabled Rome to seize land outside of Italy that it then retained as provinces; other overseas lands (and their associated peoples), such as Asia (in 133/129 BCE) and Bithynia (in 75/74 BCE; both in modern Turkey), were actually bequeathed by their kings to the ever-growing Rome. Such overseas territory was conceived of as the peoples inhabiting it. Velleius Paterculus, for example, writes in his *Roman History*, “It seems not at all useless to digress here to say which race and tribe (*gens et natio*), reduced to provincial status, was made tax-paying, and under whose military command ...” (2.38.1; composed before 31 CE). Over a century later, the historian Appian arranged his *Roman History* according to the peoples and lands Rome had conquered, devoting separate books to, for example, the wars by which Rome conquered the inhabitants of Spain, and those by which the Egyptians fell into Roman control (the latter, known only from its title, has now perished). In other words, Rome’s lands were those who inhabited them; Rome’s power was Rome’s peoples. In 60 BCE, before Caesar conquered Gaul, Rome controlled over ten sprawling provinces; after Augustus’ death in 14 CE, the provinces numbered around twenty-five; and at the time of Rome’s greatest expansion, in the first half of the second century CE, the empire administered some forty provinces.

Until 212 CE, when an imperial law was passed granting Roman citizenship to virtually all the free inhabitants of the Roman state, the provinces were populated primarily by free individuals who were not considered or treated as Roman citizens. Romans generally referred to these persons as *peregrini* or *alieni*: both terms are often translated as “foreigners,” although *peregrini* properly indicates free (non-slave) provincials, and *alieni* free persons from outside Roman territory. When in the late Republican and early Imperial periods Rome sent out colonists to the provinces, Roman military veterans and other new settlers in a city either expelled the indigenous population or reduced them to a