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Josiah Osgood

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Prologue: The Roman Empire in AD 41

In AD 41, the Roman Empire had almost reached its maximum extent. It stretched from the Rhine and Danube in northern Europe to the Atlas Mountains of Morocco and the Sahara Desert, from the Atlantic coast in the west all the way to the Euphrates in the east. Romans were well aware of outlying lands – Britain; Germany, beyond the Rhine; fertile Mesopotamia, controlled by the neighboring Parthian Empire; even India, whose perfumes, spices, ivory, and gems were shipped to Rome each year – but Romans also liked to think they ruled the world. It is true the territory they controlled was vast, perhaps 3.5 million square kilometers.¹ But it was not in fact unparalleled: at just the same time, at the other end of Eurasia in the same temperate zone, the Han Dynasty of China ruled an empire of roughly the same size.² Rome's territory, though, was more spread out and consequently more prone to fragmentation, as later history shows; holding it together was a remarkable achievement.

Approximately sixty million souls lived within this empire, of astonishing diversity.³ Traveling across it, one would have encountered different social customs – Egyptians, for instance, famously practiced brother–sister marriage, while Greeks still might seclude their wives from public life; Greek cities trained their young men in gymnasia where they exercised nude, Gallic chieftains now sent their children to Latin schools.⁴ Greek one would have heard throughout the east, ever more Latin in the west, but myriad other tongues too: Punic dialects in North Africa and Spain, Celtic in northern Europe, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac in the east.⁵ Religious practice varied, with local gods cultivated almost everywhere. Worshiping their one shared God, with His lone Temple in Jerusalem, Jews, spread across the empire, were a notable minority population, perhaps numbering as many as four or five million.⁶

But wherever one went, two fundamental distinctions applied: that between slaves and free and, within the latter group, that between citizens of Rome and aliens.⁷ Citizens were a minority – in a census taken in AD 14,

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[More information](#)

about five million were counted, almost certainly including women and children – and a privileged minority: wherever they resided, they enjoyed legal protection from torture or execution on the spot by a provincial governor; and governors were to put citizens' interests ahead of those of all others.⁸ Still, hierarchical as Rome was, within the group of citizens itself there were additional distinctions, enacted by law and enshrined by custom. The 600 or so members of the Senate and their families formed the top social class, and even within that there were divisions between the old patrician and other noble families, on the one hand, and new men, on the other, recruited from Italy, southern Gaul, and Spain. Senators still competed with one another, fiercely, for offices that they had held in the Republic: the quaestorship, the praetorship, the consulship at the top.⁹ These offices still brought luster, even if their powers were now more circumscribed. Just below the Senatorial order, and replenishing it as needed, were equestrians, required to possess an estate of 400,000 sesterces; to them new and powerful posts in the imperial government were now available. And among the masses below these top orders, town councilors formed a privileged group, while a large group of manumitted slaves, the so-called freedmen and freedwomen, though often wildly successful economically, legally suffered some disadvantages.

The empire itself was divided up into several dozen jurisdictions, typically called "provinces."¹⁰ Following an arrangement worked out after the end of the terrible civil wars of the late Republic, provinces would be ruled either by a legate chosen by the emperor from among the higher ranks of the Senate or by former consuls or praetors sent out for fixed terms of one year; the former group had control of virtually all the heavily militarized areas (and ultimately grew to have control of almost all troops, aside from some auxiliaries). One notable exception to this division was Egypt, ruled by an equestrian prefect appointed by the emperor himself. Sensitive areas on the edges of the empire – Thrace, for instance – could be ruled by native kings appointed by the emperor and ultimately answerable to him, but arrangements here were constantly evolving.

All provinces had miniscule numbers of officials: the governor and his few assistants, some slaves of the emperor, a handful of financial officers.¹¹ The Romans instead relied heavily on largely autonomous city governments to do the work of local governance for them, and also to collect taxes. Here there is a notable comparison to be made with Han China, where cities were run by low-level officials recruited from outside the territory in which they served.¹² Just as the empire, then, was a series of discrete provinces, a province itself was a collection of jurisdictions, each typically centered

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Prologue*

3

around a city. Cities managed their territories, saw to their own finances, ran the local markets, might even strike their own currency. Like individual men and women, they had statuses too: some had been founded as citizen colonies, with full Roman rights, while other, preexisting centers were made *municipia*, with full, or partial, rights; the great majority, though, were “foreign,” most paying tribute, a fortunate few exempt. Cities might be close to one another, or scattered, and they ranged in size greatly – with Rome itself an extraordinary outlier, housing perhaps one million souls.¹³ Alexandria was at most half that size, followed by the regional hubs of Carthage, Antioch, and Ephesus. Altogether there were perhaps close to 2,000 cities.

After the civil wars, Rome’s first emperor, Augustus, reduced the swollen number of sixty legions to twenty-eight, and the number was further dropped to twenty-five after the terrible loss of three legions fighting under Quinctilius Varus in Germany in AD 9.¹⁴ There it stayed – although by AD 41, two had most likely just been added, in preparation for an invasion of Britain contemplated by the emperor Caligula.¹⁵ These legions, comprising about 150,000 citizens, formed a permanent standing army; they were supplemented with about as many men serving in auxiliary units (light infantry and cavalry), recruited from subject peoples of the empire, and sometimes commanded by their own tribal leaders. Arminius, chief of the German Cherusci – and mastermind of the Varan massacre of AD 9 – is a famous example. Altogether, then, there were about 300,000 serving, with major concentrations along the Rhine, in the Balkans, and in Syria.¹⁶ The number could have been higher – but too many troops, too closely concentrated, might have threatened civil war again. And, even as it was, the army still represented by far the imperial government’s largest expense; troops received not only yearly salaries, but also generous discharge bonuses, designed to keep them obedient in service, content afterwards. Fleets, again manned by non-citizen provincials, were stationed at Misenum, Ravenna, and in southern France. Also, an elite force of twelve Praetorian cohorts (each numbering probably around 500 men), guarded the emperor’s life, normally residing within Rome, and commanded by two equestrian prefects appointed by the emperor. Very generous pay – much higher than that of legionaries – and large discharge bonuses again were to keep them loyal. A separate City prefect, a Senator, had three urban cohorts to help keep the peace in Rome.

All of these troops, their disposition, and their system of remuneration point to what was the paramount goal of the first emperor Augustus (and

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[More information](#)

the chief reason his autocracy was accepted): the maintenance of peace in the empire after the horrific civil wars. Armed forces were needed to keep his own position secure, preventing would-be rivals from reigniting civil war. Armed forces were also kept up as a deterrent to unwelcome foreign intrusions – above all by the Parthians, who had breached the boundaries of the empire during the civil wars, causing great destruction, but also in Africa, for instance, where marauding tribes threatened the precious fields of grain.¹⁷ In AD 41 itself, Sulpicius Galba, the governor of Upper Germany, was struggling with raids across the Rhine by the Chatti.¹⁸ Almost as important, the armies and their commanders were also very clearly to watch over Rome's own subjects. Of Egypt's two legions, one was stationed in the outskirts of Alexandria, to keep an eye on that large and turbulent city.¹⁹ The Rhine legions were a defense against Gauls as much as Germans.²⁰ And the troops in Syria intervened more than once in Judea, when tensions there rose.²¹

Governors played a key role also in the administration of justice, another paramount goal of the imperial government, one interlocked with the quest for peace.²² Governors were regularly called in to settle boundary disputes between cities, or handle grievances of communities about their privileges and obligations. To varying degrees, governors even tried to dispense justice to individual provincials and citizens, traveling on a regular circuit around their province to hear from those they governed. Of course, protecting the privileged citizens was, at least in principle, an almost sacred responsibility. But governors might intervene too, for instance, if edicts of the emperor guaranteeing the privileges of specific groups such as veterans, doctors, or Jews were not being followed. Appeals could even be made to the governor on matters of local law, and occasionally the appeal could be referred to the emperor himself. The imperial government naturally oversaw the administration of justice in Rome itself, too, where some of the old Republican courts survived and the magistrates still gave judgments, even as the emperor, who could hear appeals, gradually took over, along with his staff, much of the responsibility. Augustus, according to his biographer Suetonius, sat as judge often into the night, lying on a couch on the tribunal, if he was unwell, or on a sickbed at home.²³

Administration of all aspects of the City of Rome was in fact a third central task of the government, and this was an enormous operation, given just how many were crammed into it, packed into high and dangerous tenements.²⁴ No European city was so large, until London, in the age of industrialization. A substantial military presence helped – the Praetorians, the urban cohorts, and also watchmen to help fight fires. At the same time, a variety of amenities contributed to the peace, while adding to the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Prologue*

5

emperor's prestige. Water was freely distributed, through the great system of aqueducts, three of which were built under Augustus.²⁵ There was a regular dole of free grain for citizens, given to perhaps a fifth of the City's population, and Augustus also appointed an equestrian prefect, to make sure there was an adequate food supply overall: well over 200,000 metric tons of wheat (the equivalent of 4 million sacks of 50 kilograms each) was required each year, most of which had to be brought on ships from overseas.²⁶ Spectacles were shown free: plays, gladiatorial matches, chariot-racing in the Circus, and beast hunts, the latter requiring importation of exotic animals, giraffes, tigers, panthers, and lions, sometimes hundreds at a time.²⁷ At the end of his life, the emperor Augustus boasted that he had given twenty-six beast hunts, at which 3,500 animals were killed.²⁸

The scale of the government's activity was not unduly large – certainly, Rome took on no more than Han China – but given the empire's overall size, it required extensive effort. Gathering, organizing, and deploying resources was, then, a final key function of the imperial government. The whole operation rested on the collection of tribute.²⁹ Some goods of value were collected directly, some resources – precious metal mines, for instance, and stone quarries – controlled directly. But in a world where peasant agriculture was the chief economic activity, and the transportation of surpluses expensive, taxation of individuals was a necessity, on their land and also, more efficiently, on their heads. For this, it was necessary to inventory and count, and census-taking became a regular imperial practice, made famous forever by the census of Quirinius, in Judea, introduced portentously at the start of Luke's Gospel.³⁰ Collection itself was largely left to the leaders of local communities, who can only have undertaken the task in exchange for the ability to keep some of the local surplus for themselves. That actually happened in China, too, but in the Roman Empire much of that surplus was then used to adorn the cities with lavish buildings of stone, the ruins of which survive to this day.³¹ As the existence of the poll tax suggests, taxes could be assessed at least partly in monetary terms, and that was possible in turn because the government also took as its responsibility the maintenance of a money supply on an unprecedented scale. From the central mint there were vast outputs, of coin theoretically worth the value of its content, whether gold, silver, bronze, or copper.

So much for the ambitions of the empire, but what of the obstacles to fulfilling them? Perhaps above all was the enemy of every vast empire of history: distance. Certain large, or remote, areas, within the boundaries of the empire or contiguous to it, simply could not be policed: deserts, mountain ranges, regions thickly forested. In them, outlaws might congregate,

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[More information](#)

periodically breaking the peace elsewhere. Distance also posed difficulties in communication. Despite Rome's justly renowned roads, and the creation of a posting system under Augustus, which relied on the requisitioning of local communities' wagons and mules to speed messages along, it was quite hard to bring the average rate of travel by land much above fifty Roman miles per day.³² From Rome to Antioch was about 2,500 Roman miles, and for a message to get there and back could easily take two months. And so, even if general policies could be set in Rome, by necessity men on the spot had to have a great deal of power. At the same time, considering the hierarchical nature of Roman society, the governor's high status, even the status of subordinate officials, easily overwhelmed that of all others: imperial government, then, could only really be as good as the men chosen to run it. While rights of appeal might exist, it would be hard for poor villagers, far from the governor's seat of justice, to exercise them.

Another set of limitations was financial.³³ If more tribute were to be extracted from the local communities, the government risked losing local support; raising indirect taxes was politically hard too; in the early empire, some of the most hateful memories of the civil wars concerned the exactions of the warlords.³⁴ There was no issuing of bonds, nor any "printing" of money, at least in our period – coinage was supposed to be pure. And unlike the Persian or Egyptian Empires, Rome seems not to have maintained reserves, at least by set policy. The result was not just a year-to-year struggle to match revenues with expenditures, but also the real difficulty of taking on major new commitments, including especially military operations – even if desired. In AD 14, following the death of Augustus, the troops in Pannonia and Lower Germany staged rebellions over their pay and terms of service – and the concessions they extracted were later rescinded by Tiberius.³⁵

Other rebellions flared up in the years after Augustus' death, reflecting sometimes general dissatisfaction with Roman rule, more often unhappiness brought on by census-taking, tax-collection, or the imposition of military service. In Gaul, in AD 21, a rising took place, led by two Gallic nobles, the principal cause almost certainly economic distress.³⁶ There was also, under Tiberius, a full rising of the Musulamii in Africa, instigated by the Numidian Tacfarinas, a former auxiliary trooper who had deserted from the army and was raiding Roman territory.³⁷ At the start of AD 41 itself, the east was unsettled, with a recent crisis only narrowly averted in Judea, after Caligula had tried to convert the Temple of Jerusalem into an imperial shrine and install a colossal gold statue in the Holy of Holies.³⁸

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Prologue*

7

Such troubles were not in themselves grave enough to bring down the empire. The greatest immediate threat lay within the imperial government itself, for the government was, in a sense, divided. Fundamentally, it had two only slightly overlapping branches – the old, but still functioning *res publica*, on the one hand, represented above all by the Senators who still commanded most of the armies and, on the other, the emperor himself and his court, in which all manner of intrigues could blossom. For ideological reasons, Augustus had felt it desirable to keep the venerable old *res publica* alive – so obsessed were Romans with preserving their traditions – but power predominantly lay with him and the members of his court. And unlike Han China, in early imperial Rome, an ideology had not been fully worked out, and perhaps could not, that supported the political reality.³⁹ Augustus called himself *princeps*, an old Republican term that originally meant “first man” or “leader” and did not imply the holding of a transferable office.⁴⁰ His successors were not automatically accorded the authority that he had acquired.

And so, in the years following his death, all too easily resentments flared up over the way power was distributed, with a breakdown in relations between members of the Senate and the emperor in particular, which forced the people and the army to choose sides. Tiberius, Augustus’ immediate successor, who was *princeps* from AD 14–37, tried to cooperate with the Senate initially, attending its debates, consulting it on matters he need not have. But it was unclear to Senators just how much they might say, and Tiberius found the tact required in dealing with them difficult to muster. Perhaps even worse, under Tiberius, Senators began more fully to use accusations of treason against the emperor as a way to persecute one another; after Tiberius himself retired from Rome to rule from the island of Capri, the situation grew worse still. Altogether, at least several dozen men were accused of treason. Disgruntled, demoralized, the Senate refused to vote Tiberius after his death the divine honors they had granted Augustus in AD 14.

Under Tiberius’ successor, Caligula, relations between Senate and emperor deteriorated. Only twenty-four years old on his accession, Caligula had little practice in dealing with Senators, which fact alone, despite the euphoria over Tiberius’ death, might have led to some mild resentment. But Caligula’s subsequent behavior, perhaps best seen as a mixture of intemperate conceit and concerted effort to recast the emperor’s rule as more akin to that of an eastern king, provoked outright hostility. Treason trials resumed, and in AD 39, Caligula claimed to have detected a conspiracy against him led by Cornelius Gaetulicus, the legate of Upper Germany,

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[More information](#)

who was executed without trial; later in the year, perhaps also implicated in Gaetulicus' conspiracy, Aemilius Lepidus, the widower of Caligula's sister Drusilla, was put to death, while Caligula's own sisters, Julia Livilla and Julia Agrippina, accused of having been Lepidus' lovers, were exiled.⁴¹ More executions followed. Though it was actually officers of his own Praetorian Guard who killed Caligula, Senators would in no way mourn the loss.

So it was that in AD 41, while the contours of the Roman Empire had already largely been set by Augustus, at its heart lay a key political weakness, exposed and amplified by more recent events. And to that weakness Claudius brought a new problem all his own.

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Introduction: The problem of Claudius

Throughout his childhood and early adult years, Claudius never could have expected to become ruler of the Roman world. Born in 10 BC to Drusus, Augustus' stepson, and Antonia, Augustus' niece, he had not a drop of the first emperor's blood in him. But that was not his disqualification, for Claudius' own older brother, Germanicus, was considered a possible successor (Fig. 1). When, in AD 4, Augustus finally adopted Tiberius, gave him new powers, and made him his heir, he required Tiberius first to adopt Germanicus; both thereby gained the crucial name "Caesar" and entered the Julian family.¹ And after the premature death of Germanicus in AD 19, it was Germanicus' own young sons, including Gaius Caesar – otherwise known as Caligula – rather than Claudius, who came to be seen as possible successors to Tiberius.² The obstacle for Claudius was that as a child he suffered from a nervous disorder now diagnosed as dystonia – symptoms mentioned included irregular motor movements, a stammer, and drooling – and was thus deemed unsuitable for public life.³ His own mother, it could be claimed, liked to call him "a freak of a man, not finished by Nature but only begun."⁴ She, along with the rest of the family, finally decided, when Germanicus was consul in AD 12, that Claudius was not to serve in any magistracy or to join the Senate. "The public," as Augustus wrote to his wife Livia at the time, "must not be given a chance of mocking him – and us."⁵

Claudius was given no experience of warfare, oratory, and the law, the staples of a Roman noble's education.⁶ Excluded from the men's world, he spent his days in the household of his mother and his grandmother, Livia (his father had died when Claudius was still an infant).⁷ The family ignored him, it is said, a tutor found who administered savage beatings.⁸ The young man allegedly sought consolation in drinking and dicing; he also wrote voluminous histories, in Latin and Greek, on the age of Augustus and the antiquities of the Etruscans and the Carthaginians.⁹ Only when Caligula succeeded Tiberius, in AD 37, did Claudius, now forty-five years old, join

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[More information](#)



Fig. 1 Portrait of Germanicus, from Gabii. Louvre, Paris.