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罗马帝国简史

The Roman Empire

A Very Short Introduction

Christopher Kelly 著
黄 洋 译

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Introduction

The Roman empire was a remarkable achievement. At its height, in the 2nd century AD, it had a population of around 60 million people spread across 5 million square kilometres (roughly 20 times the area of the United Kingdom). Then the empire stretched from Hadrian's Wall in drizzle-soaked northern England to the sun-baked banks of the Euphrates in Syria; from the great Rhine-Danube river system, which snaked across the fertile, flat lands of Europe from the Low Countries to the Black Sea, to the rich plains of the North African coast and the luxuriant gash of the Nile valley in Egypt. The empire completely encircled the Mediterranean. This was the Romans' internal lake, complacently referred to by its conquerors as *mare nostrum* – 'our sea'.

This book aims (briefly) to explore some significant aspects of this imperial super-state. Its approach is resolutely thematic; not through any dislike of chronology (see pp. 138–140), but because there are already a good number of useful accounts both of the narrative history of the Roman empire and of the reigns of individual emperors. This book takes a different path across the same territory. Chapter 1 looks at the brutal process of conquest, at the establishment of empire, and at the Romans' sense of their own imperial mission. Chapter 2 considers the presentation of imperial power: it looks at emperors both as gods (in the promotion of the imperial cult) and as men (in the often unflattering histories of

Suetonius and Tacitus). Chapter 3 shifts perspective in order to understand the workings of empire from the point of view of the privileged elites in the cities of the Mediterranean. It was these wealthy men – rather than some vast imperial administration – who were principally responsible for the orderly government of the provinces.

Chapter 4 exploits some of the less well-known literature of the 2nd century AD, written by Greeks under Roman rule. These are precious texts. They offer a sense – rarely recoverable for pre-modern empires – of how those who were conquered sought to establish an identity in a new imperial world. In the Roman empire disputes about the present were often conducted through debates about the past. History-writing was not an isolated, academic exercise; rather, it directly engaged with the language of politics and power. The present may have been resolutely Roman, but the past was still to be fought over.

Chapter 5 turns to consider the growth of the most important group of outsiders in the Roman empire. Christians and their faith were fundamentally shaped by their experiences on the margins of society. By contrast, Chapter 6 offers an insider view, seeking to establish some sense of what it might have been like to live and die in the towns and fields of this huge pre-industrial empire. Chapter 7, the final chapter, looks back at Rome from three modern perspectives: from the British empire in the decade before the First World War, from the fascist Italy of Mussolini, and from Hollywood. These views are important. In a number of significant (and sometimes surprising) ways, they still determine how, at the beginning of the 21st century, the Roman empire is both imagined and judged. Certainly, it is one of the privileges of the present to be able to look back selectively at the past. But equally – as with this Very Short Introduction – it is always important to be aware of that selectivity.

This book concentrates on the Roman empire at the peak of its

prosperity. For the most part, it focuses on two centuries, roughly 31 BC to AD 192: from the victory of the future emperor Augustus over Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium to the assassination of the emperor Commodus. (Although Chapter 1 looks back to the Punic Wars, and Chapter 5 briefly looks forward to the beginning of the 4th century AD, in order to conclude with the conversion of Constantine, the first Roman emperor publicly to support Christianity.)

The principal concern of the following chapters is to understand Rome's achievement in establishing and maintaining one of the largest world empires, and the only one to have embraced northern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. That success in itself demands a rich and complex explanation. Only then is it possible to begin to understand the reasons for the subsequent weakening of Roman power, the eventual break-up of the empire in the West into barbarian kingdoms, and the gradual emergence of Byzantium in the East. These themes run far beyond the compass of this book. The best account of that 'awful revolution' remains the magisterial treatment of Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London, 1776–1788). But the unwary enthusiast should take note: at six substantial volumes, it was never Gibbon's intention to offer anything approaching a very short introduction.

Chapter 1
Conquest

Expansion and survival

Rome was a warrior state. Its vast empire had been hard won in a series of fiercely fought campaigns. In the 4th century BC Rome – then an unremarkable city – secured its survival through a complex network of alliances with surrounding peoples. A series of victories allowed the Romans to establish their own territory along the Tiber valley and to expand their sphere of influence southwards into Campania (around the Bay of Naples). This was a slow process of gradual advance and steady consolidation. Notable breakthroughs came with the defeat of the Samnites in 295 BC (leading to the extension of Roman control into central Italy) and the thwarted invasion of Pyrrhus, the ruler of Epirus, a kingdom on the Adriatic coast of Greece. In 280 BC Pyrrhus landed his army at Tarentum (modern Taranto on the 'heel' of Italy); despite initial success, he was unable to force a Roman surrender. After five years' campaigning in Sicily and southern Italy, rather than stretch his limited resources and risk defeat, Pyrrhus withdrew.

By the middle of the 3rd century BC, most of the Italian peninsula was under Roman control. In the next hundred years the Romans and their allies challenged the North African city of Carthage, the dominant power in the western Mediterranean. A fleet of merchant ships guaranteed Carthage's continued prosperity and international

influence: sailing east to Egypt and Lebanon to trade in luxury goods; north, perhaps as far as Britain, to purchase tin; and south along the African coast to bring back ivory and gold. Against this threatening rival, three long conflicts – known as the Punic Wars – stretched the Romans to their limits. The immediate cause of the First Punic War (264–241 BC) was a dispute over Sicily. The Romans regarded the escalating Carthaginian military presence on the island as a direct threat to their own security. Yet no serious opposition could be offered without an effective means to counter Carthage's command of the seas. The Romans, whose victories in Italy had been based on the superiority of their army, were forced to build a permanent navy. Soldiers were hurriedly retrained as sailors. Later tradition would claim that skilled carpenters had copied the construction of an enemy vessel which had run aground, building 100 ships in 60 days. In the end, this risky strategy paid off. In 241 BC, after 23 years of bitter warfare, the Romans were finally able to enforce a complete Carthaginian withdrawal.

An uneasy peace lasted little more than 20 years. In the Second Punic War (218–201 BC), the great Carthaginian general Hannibal, in one of the most daring and imaginative military campaigns in the ancient world, marched his army of 50,000 men, 9,000 cavalry, and 37 elephants from Spain, across southern France, and over the Alps into Italy. Fewer than half the men survived the journey. Seven months later, in May 217, in the early morning mist, Hannibal trapped the Roman general Flaminius and his troops at Lake Trasimene in Umbria, killing 15,000 men. The following year he nearly wiped out the Roman army at Cannae in Apulia. This was the severest defeat ever inflicted on the Romans. In one battle they lost 50,000 men: the highest death-toll for an army in a single day's fighting in the history of European warfare. And unlike the casualties at the Somme, the Roman soldiers at Cannae fell in hand-to-hand combat, their corpses piled high across a bloody plain.

Hannibal occupied Italy for 15 years. Under the command of Fabius

Maximus – admiringly nicknamed Cunctator, 'the Delayer' – the Romans and their allies deliberately avoided pitched battles. Instead, they burned their own crops and retreated to fortified towns. Slowly starved by this scorched-earth policy, and harried by Roman raiding parties, Hannibal's army was forced to abandon the campaign. The Romans were victorious, but not for a long decade after Cannae. It was not until 202 that Hannibal, recalled to defend Carthage, was defeated at the battle of Zama (in modern Tunisia) by Scipio Africanus. Sixty years later a revived Rome returned to eliminate a much weakened and demoralized Carthage. The Third Punic War (149–146 BC) ended with the complete destruction of the city. Its buildings were systematically levelled and most of its 50,000 surviving inhabitants enslaved.

Expansion westward into Spain and North Africa was matched by war in the East. By 146 BC – the year in which both Carthage and Corinth were sacked – all the major cities in the Balkan peninsula were subject to Rome. In the following century, after a series of difficult campaigns, Asia Minor was finally secured; in the 60s the successful general Pompey 'the Great' annexed Syria; in the 50s Julius Caesar conquered Gaul (from the Pyrenees in southern France to the Rhine); in 31 BC his adopted son Octavian defeated Cleopatra VII, the last independent ruler of Egypt. That victory in a naval battle off Actium in north-western Greece brought the greatest prize. Egypt, the oldest and wealthiest kingdom in the Mediterranean, was now fully part of the Roman empire.

In the wars against Carthage and in the East Rome's traditional, republican system of government had worked tolerably well. Indeed, the 2nd century BC, with its string of military conquests, is conventionally regarded as the apogee of the Roman Republic. Yet, in some ways, 'Republic' is a misleading term. It risks implying – at least for modern readers – too great a degree of popular participation in politics. (This is not an ancient difficulty; the Latin *res publica* is best translated simply as 'affairs of state'.) The Roman Republic was an unabashed plutocracy; the citizen-body was

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