Introduction

In the summer of 1897, Sigmund Freud came within fifty miles of Rome, but, for the second time, he could not bring himself to make the journey to the city as he had planned to do. In recounting the episode, he mused that he might have developed a “Roman neurosis,” which would inhibit him from entering the eternal city. A cosmopolitan Viennese like him could hardly have been daunted by the hastily expanded new capital of the Kingdom of Italy. Nor was it simply the small-minded, bigoted capital of Catholicism that repelled the tolerant Jew in him. Acutely dissecting his quirks as usual, Freud uncovered the root of his unexpected inhibition in the long shadow that ancient Rome was still casting on his consciousness. He saw the Roman Empire, together with the Christian Church that succeeded it, as relentless, sprawling, engulfing organizations that scared him and turned him away. In his mind, Rome was an oppressive, almighty force, like a terrible father. He recalled how, as a schoolboy, he had instinctively taken the doomed side of Hannibal. He claimed to have felt an instinctive kinship with the noble Semitic rebel. Now sitting outside Rome, he learnedly speculated that perhaps, just like Hannibal, he was destined to come within sight of the walls but never to clear them.¹

Freud was naturally inclined to treat his own perception of ancient Rome entirely as a reflection of his own idiosyncratic perspective on life and history, rather than being a product of the biases embedded in the scholarship of the time. But the textbooks that had shaped his views on Rome during his Hochgymnasium years arguably did not have a much stronger claim to a balanced assessment of the great empire than his admittedly irrational fantasies. Indeed, the vaunted objective and scientific picture of Roman imperialism that fellow German-speakers had painstakingly put together

¹ Simmons 2006. Many interpretations of Freud’s “Roman phobia” have been advanced. See an effective overview in Timpanaro 1984, which convincingly demonstrates that it was Rome as a historical icon (rather than as a symbol of oppressive fatherhood or longed-for motherhood) that played on Freud’s imagination. In 1901, however, Freud evidently got over himself and finally paid an extended visit to the city, which he repeated many times afterwards.
during Freud's lifetime was in great part the result of similarly visceral prejudices and deep-seated assumptions. Rome's terrifying historiographical presence was not simply a scholarly construction, nor was it, as all our attempts at narrating the past inevitably are, only a way of making sense of the present. By Freud's time, the story of Rome's ascent had been treated unlike any other comparable process. It still occupies a unique place in most intellectual traditions. The peculiar way in which Rome and especially its expansion have been construed for the last 2,000 years offers an unrivaled example of how self-sustaining traditions can acquire a life of their own.

A very long time before the Belle Époque, far less impressionable spirits than Freud had been utterly awed by the success of Rome. It is no exaggeration to say that few, if any, other historical processes have had a comparable evocative power. The rapid growth of large empires has always attracted the attention of posterity, but no rags-to-riches story has been as virally pervasive as that of Rome. The meteoric rise of Alexander or the vigorous feudal welding of Charlemagne may have had powerful afterlives, but in the end nothing could truly match the powerful fascination exerted by the image projected by Rome, with its collective rather than individual action, with its triumph of superior moral qualities and with the indelible impact it had on everything that followed. No scholarly discourse can ever abstract from dominant popular perceptions, and this is particularly true in the case of Rome's expansion. Precisely because of its cultural ubiquity, the narratives about Rome have tended to remain confined within a relatively narrow interpretative range. Many scholars are animated by a drive to subvert the frameworks of the previous generations, so that new ones can be advanced. And yet, there are some assumptions about the Roman conquest that are rooted in long-standing, universal perceptions of this process and that consequently have gone largely unchallenged so far. This may seem hard to believe when one considers the sheer mass of studies published on Rome and its reception over the last century or so, but it can perhaps be explained with reference to the peculiar place that the Roman past has had in the emergence of modern historical thinking. When the accepted view on some topic is as central to an entire cultural, philosophical, and educational system, it can be particularly difficult to call into question such deep foundations without appearing to flirt with nonsense. In a way, some fundamental ideas about the essential nature of the Roman conquest have yet to be evaluated and tested in full. They have been taken for granted because they were part of the narrative since the first time it was told, soon after the events transpired.
Reviewing here, once more, scholarly and popular views on Roman imperialism is not just an exercise in intellectual history. It can instead provide a valuable point of departure for innovative and unconventional new reconstructions. While the broader field of classical reception studies has flourished in recent decades, it has not always been the case that the results of those deconstructive attempts have had a direct, constructive impact on the production of different historical ideas about Rome. Attempting to do precisely this in the specific case of the expansion of Rome may yield interesting results, especially when one considers how this part of the story has always figured prominently in scholarly and lay narratives alike, but has been the object of fewer reflexive studies than many others. At this point in the debate, retracing the afterlife of Roman imperialism may prove tangibly beneficial to a radical rethinking of this process. An entire book could barely do full justice to this rich and complex tradition, so the present overview will necessarily be incomplete and summary, and yet indispensable for the kind of comprehensive historical revision that is attempted here. It will also necessarily deal with views of the whole extent of Roman imperialism, rather than specifically with the early part of it. This is because most opinions about it, especially in the pre-modern period, referred to the entire process, from the siege of Veii to the invasions of Britain and Dacia. In those formulations, however, the fourth and third centuries BCE always played a very significant role, so that they are highly relevant to the period discussed in the following chapters.

Debating Roman Imperialism: The Early Days

It is obvious that the discourse on the beginning of Roman expansion was already under way at the time the events themselves were unfolding, but our earliest information comes from writers dating to an advanced stage of the process, like Polybius, or to its tail end, like Cicero, Livy, or Tacitus. The voices of the actual people who turned the small Roman state into a world power are all but lost to us and we have only those of the men, like Caesar or Trajan, who expanded an empire that already had no rivals. What little survives, like the epitaph of the general Scipio Barbatus (who died in 280

2 Recent overviews in Hardwick and Stray 2008; Walde and Egger 2012.
3 Reference is made here to reflexivity theory, for which see among others Bourdieu 2001.
4 A book that has not yet been written. Important work in this sense is contained in Desideri 1991; Hingley 2001; Millar 2002. My own contribution in the latter volume, Terrenato 2001a, contains some of the basic ideas underpinning this chapter.
BCE), evokes for us a rhetoric based on military and civilian achievement. The key factor that made it possible is valor (virtus), an indispensable moral quality for the successful office-holder. The empire seems to be the natural consequence of the valorous, honorable, and legitimate actions undertaken by Roman elites, and its expansion must be a primary goal of its elites. Much of the later Roman discourse would present conflict and conquest as duty-bound responses to complex diplomatic entanglements, to outside threats or harassment or to outright aggression, without ever articulating a grand strategy. Greek observers like Polybius, on the other hand, could see an explicit imperialist agenda in the action of Rome, similar to those that competing Mediterranean expansionists had tried to advance. Polybius did not find what the Romans did abhorrent, however, and he agreed with them in attributing their success to the nature and structure of their society. Like a good Greek thinker, he paid particular attention to political abstractions and identified the secret ingredient as Rome's moderate constitution, rather than as any specific behavioral trait.

Later on, Cicero and his contemporaries placed an even greater emphasis on moral qualities: for the great orator, the Romans only fought just wars, i.e. wars sparked by a provocation or by legitimate defensive concerns, and preceded by a ritually prescribed formal declaration. Indeed, scrupulous Roman piety would be essential to securing the divine favor without which no imperial success would be possible. For Cicero, another important ingredient is moderation in the treatment of defeated enemies, a magnanimous policy that inspires loyalty and further affirms the superiority of the conquerors. Instead, when provincial governors greedily exploit their subjects, the morality of empire is at risk. His idea that, at least in their pristine form, the Romans were intrinsically a cut above everyone else, and thus worthy of leadership, would go on to influence views of the conquest for centuries after his time. What debate there might have been among Roman intellectuals in the heyday of the empire revolved mainly around the ethics of the conquest or the best administrative policies to

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5 Badian 1968: 12–13; La Regina 1968.
6 McDonnell 2006; Balmaceda 2017.
7 These ideas will go on to constitute the foundation of modern theories of defensive imperialism, see pp. 18–22.
8 Musti 1978; Eckstein 1995; Millar 2002: 23–36; Baronowski 2011; also several of the papers in Derow, Smith, and Yarrow 2012.
9 Brunt 1978; Rose 1995.
10 Griffin 2008; the importance of Roman clemency is also emphasized in Vergil and Livy, Adler 2003.
Debating Roman Imperialism: The Early Days

In the first few centuries CE, the Roman Empire was such a well-established, apparently indestructible institution that the causes that had brought it about tended to be taken for granted. Professional eulogizers like Aelius Aristides sang the praises of the Romans as “dominators by nature,” and even more critical thinkers connected with actual resistance movements, like Flavius Josephus, saw something inherently immanent and universal in the great empire, despite its occasional shortcomings.

Taking a general look at the Roman perception of their own imperial success, it is clear that their narrative of the conquest, in hindsight, had the Romans as the only real characters and focused exclusively on their actions, their thought processes and their moral traits. Internal political and historiographical debates did take place, but they never questioned the axiom that what made such an unprecedented ascent possible was to be sought within Rome itself, in its ideal location, in the unique spiritual, military, or constitutional qualities of its polity. Rome’s pragmatism and adaptability were emphasized in some historical traditions and political speeches. Non-Romans, however defined, were typically treated briefly and mostly in terms of their friendliness or animosity towards Rome. They could be depicted as very aggressive, and in some cases as terrifying (as in the case of Hannibal or of the Gauls), but they did not shape the empire in any significant way. Even if their resistance and their indomitability might have been admired (for instance that of the Samnites), it did not affect the final outcome. Subtler strategies, from back-channel diplomacy and bribery to false compliance and foot-dragging did not figure much in the established narratives. The willingness of the Romans to incorporate non-Romans and, by granting them citizenship over time, turn them into Romans, was, on the other hand, sometimes highlighted as an important component, in which however the grantees were nothing more than grateful recipients of an enlightened policy. Similarly, broader political and economic circumstances and conjunctures that might have played a role in

12 In Tacitus and elsewhere, the ethical implications of the conquest were considered, especially in fictional speeches given by enemy leaders, Clarke 2001; Adler 2011.
17 In terms of contemporary treatments, most notable are a letter of the Macedonian king Philip V describing Roman citizenship policies and a speech of the emperor Claudius, both remarking on the long-standing policy of admitting conquered people into the empire; Griffin 1982; Kousser 2005; Kleijwegt 2009. For the issue in general, Woolf 2012: 218–32.
the expansion were consistently underplayed. To give just an example, little or no consideration was typically given to the fact that central Italy, unlike most other Mediterranean regions, was characterized by a particularly high density of states that had comparable complexity, social structure, and culture.

A mentality of this kind is not at all surprising, considering how all empires need the propaganda boost and the ideological reinforcement that is provided by the one-sided exaltation of their conquest in history, art, and literature. Assyrian or Aztec texts and reliefs do not show more concern for the larger context of the conquest they exalt. What is distinctive about Rome’s case, however, is that the precipitously slanted narratives composed by the imperialists did not run their course and die with the empire that produced them, having exhausted their function. The hagiography of the Roman conquest instead became crystallized, constituting the foundation for most of the subsequent historiographic and popular discourse. Scholars simply accepted the conquerors’ view of their deeds at face value. Even more, the memory of the Roman Empire went on to underpin ideologies of power in all the lands that had been part of it, from Britain to Syria, but even far beyond its reach, in places like northern Europe, Russia, or Ethiopia. As the name of Rome grew to become synonymous with past glory, many later empires (and aspiring ones) found in it a suitable, edifying role model to boost their self-confidence.

It was not only would-be emperors and other politicians that relied on a stock image of Rome. Intellectuals and thinkers as well tended to imagine the Roman period as a golden age, in cultural as much as in political terms. As Latin became the lingua franca of scholarship and international diplomacy, stylish writers like Cicero were adopted as required reading even at fairly elementary levels of education. As a result, their perspectives and assumptions about Rome’s expansion were widely espoused and became pillars of medieval and Renaissance culture. The basic assumptions about their own conquest that Romans had were universally embraced and informed all later treatments of a historical process that was perceived as foundational for a wide range of states across Christendom and beyond. In this way, a dominant historical perspective was formed across different national and thematic discourses; it became so embedded that it was barely scratched by even the most radical recent deconstructive attempts. The past always tends to be a battleground of discordant tellings and retellings, but

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18 Brumfiel 2001; Gutiérrez, Terrenato, and Otto 2015.
most narratives about the Roman expansion shared some fundamental frameworks.

A role in such a remarkable process of historical petrification was undoubtedly played by the onset of Christianity. Because originally the spread of the new religion had been centered in Rome and had benefited from the infrastructure of the empire, it was natural to see the latter as a divinely ordained vehicle for the expedient propagation of the faith. When, in the late fourth century CE, Christianity became the state religion, this appeared to confirm definitively the teleological interpretation of Rome's expansionistic parable. Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–340) influentially theorized that the primary reason why the empire had emerged was to facilitate God's plan; he maintained that the emperor himself was divinely appointed and favored in his military triumphs.\(^\text{19}\) Eusebius was building on a concept that had already been established by Church Fathers such as Melito of Sardis in the second century CE.\(^\text{20}\) In this new worldview, an omnipotent god had rendered the conquest unstoppable to accomplish his plan, independently of the surrounding circumstances. Thus the credit that Romans had assigned to their own piety and ritual scruple was neatly transferred to another divine source of historical causation. Overall, the belief that the expansion was not a hard thing to explain was further reinforced.

Despite his avowed devotion to and admiration for Cicero, Augustine of Hippo (354–430) notoriously defined Rome as an “imperious” city which had imposed its yoke and its language by force. The motives animating the pagan Roman commanders were lustful and were typical of the city of Man, and yet at the same time they unknowingly prepared the ground for the city of God. But, as the venerable imperial institution started to teeter in the West, Augustine was keen to point out that its function had been exhausted and that, like all earthly, prideful human endeavors, it was doomed to fall apart in the end. When the Western Roman Empire finally collapsed, he made sense of the traumatic development arguing that Rome's ascent had simply provided an infrastructure for the establishment of the Roman church and that it had evidently now fulfilled its true purpose.\(^\text{21}\) Augustine's harsh ethical and spiritual judgment on the empire stands at the head of a long, if at times subterranean, line of counternarratives that will present Rome as an amoral and insatiable war machine.

\(^{19}\) Davis 1957: 40–65; Barnes 1981; Canning 1996: 4–5.

\(^{20}\) Kannaday 2004: 50.

\(^{21}\) Arbesmann 1954; Burns 1988: 103–16; Canning 1996: 39–43; Dyson 2005. The link between the Roman Empire and Christianity is still discussed by theologians today, e.g., Horsley 2002.
The political demise of Rome in the West, however, marked the beginning of its afterlife as a model, inspiration, predecessor and provider of legitimacy. If its function as a Christian vehicle had run its course, its stellar popularity as an ideological symbol had just begun. Early barbarian rulers made use of Roman imagery not only in their complex dealings with the Byzantines, but also locally as a way of making clear what their ambitions and pretensions were, especially whenever new kingdoms or dynasties were being created, or their boundaries were being expanded. In these frequent cases, Rome was referenced as the ultimate example of military prowess producing boundless expansion and an iron grip on the conquered lands. For instance, after his victories over the Visigoths, Frankish expansionist Clovis was acclaimed as “consul” and as “Augustus,” and clearly relied on the model of Rome for his own state-building efforts. Theoderic unashamedly proclaimed that the Roman emperors were his predecessors, while Bede endowed the kings of Kent with imperium. Thus, right after the western empire disappeared, the states that had replaced it were quick to recruit its memory in support of their agendas, and, in so doing, they implicitly subscribed to the Romans’ own view of the conquest and laid the foundation of a stock image of their expansion that would prove extremely long-lived and hard to challenge in the following centuries.

By the time the Carolingian monarchy was established, the imagery and vocabulary drawn from the Roman past was firmly embedded in official propaganda. Charlemagne explicitly likened his empire-building to that of the Romans, and claimed to be in fact restoring their glory. His court propaganda, as expressed by the prominent scholar and poet Alcuin (c. 735–804; nicknamed Flaccus, like Horace), dubbed the king Augustus and his capital Aix-la-Chapelle the “second Rome.” Charlemagne’s actions spoke even louder: he notoriously came to Rome to be crowned by the pope, producing just one of countless episodes in the complex dialectic between the memory of the pagan emperors and the reality of the Roman pontiffs; significantly, his seal announced in no uncertain terms that a “renewal of the Roman Empire” was under way. The theme of the renovation of past glories pervaded the Christian West for centuries and also included biblical kingdoms and other golden ages whose return was hailed or expected. But the influence exerted

22 Hen 1993.
by Rome remained unparalleled.25 In the tenth century, the Saxon emperors Otto I and III assumed the appellative Augustus and claimed to rule the Romans as well as the Franks, once again proclaiming the rebirth of the old empire.27 Elsewhere, the rulers of Britain also styled themselves emperors and Caesars, and so did the early kings of León in Spain.28

It is not only Roman concepts of monarchy that were current in medieval Europe. The Latin term for state (res publica) was employed in Carolingian parlance, and many other times afterwards, for instance to describe the transitional period between the emperors Henry II and Conrad II in the early eleventh century.29 John of Salisbury (c. 1120–1180) defined the res publica as the common good in classic Ciceronian terms, within the context of a treatise in which the ancient Romans were characterized as greedy imperialists (even if some great leaders like Camillus or Caesar were praised).30 Anti-monarchical governments like those existing in some communes in Italy were keen to reference the republican period, illustrating the richness and flexibility of the uses to which the Roman past could be put. Pisa, which in the twelfth century was a rising power in the Mediterranean, capitalized on its foundation as a Roman colony over a thousand years before. It portrayed itself as a reincarnation of Rome in its best republican days, with consuls carrying out successful naval expeditions as far as the eastern shore of the Mediterranean.31 In Rome itself, a short-lived but very visible attempt to establish a republican commune was couched in terms of a re-founding of the original empire of the time of the conquest.32 One of the demagogues involved, Arnold of Brescia, inflamed the populace with the example of the “ancient Romans, who made the whole world theirs through ripe counsel of the Senate and the courage of their youth.”33

In the centuries after the western Roman Empire disappeared and the eastern one, with some exceptions, was reduced to defending unsuccessfully its shrinking frontiers, Rome did not lose any of its iconic value in

26 Golden Rome, Rome head of the world, capital of the universe are only some of the enthusiastic expressions of admiration; Folz 1953: 39–42; Noble 2013.
28 Drögereit 1952; Mackay and Benaboud 1984.
30 O’Daly 2012. John also significantly introduced for the first time the metaphor, commonplace from the Renaissance onwards, of the dwarves standing of the shoulders of giants to indicate the relationship between ancient achievements and modern ones.
31 Classen 1982; Wickham 1992. The Pisan consuls emphasized their emulation of great republican heroes like Cato or Attilius Regulus, Fisher 1966
32 Benson 1982; O’Daly 2012
33 Davis 1974: 30–31
the eyes of emerging rulers and their propagandists. On the contrary, it was pressed into active political service to provide legitimacy and sanction to expansionist attempts of all kinds. Clearly, by evoking the great empire of the past, the sense was conveyed that the new political entities would have the same fortune, durability, and prosperity. Military success and territorial conquest were closely associated with the use of Roman vocabulary and images, and over time this created a canonical image of Rome as the archetype of empire-building. Thus, at a very early formative stage of what would become western European culture, and in the absence of proper historical scholarship, a specific interpretation of Rome’s expansion was nailed in place by an imposed analogy with contemporary political events. In their attempts to characterize positively their own expansionism, these medieval comparatists implicitly reinforced the idea that the Roman conquest had been a military endeavor in which the braver and the more powerful had prevailed over lesser peoples.  

Therefore, a basic interpretative framework of this kind had already been firmly in place for centuries when the first humanists began their scholarly retelling of the Roman conquest. The early modern narratives were developed around that fundamental template. While other periods of antiquity, like Periclean Athens, were essentially rediscovered by Renaissance scholars after a long silence, the discourse on Rome never ceased even in times of minimal literacy and book-writing. In this way, crucial elements of what later elite Romans thought of the conquest seeped directly into our historiographical tradition and are still with us now.

The Beginnings of Historical Research

The judgment on the greediness of the Roman state that was passed in the twelfth century by John of Salisbury, however qualified and motivated by contemporary considerations, represents one of the earliest scholarly interpretations of the ascent of the great empire after those of the classical and early Christian periods. It ushered in an era of specialist discourse conducted at a high intellectual level and, at least ostensibly, less directly connected with the political propaganda of its time. From this period onwards, ‘pure’ researchers created a true intellectual debate on ancient Rome. Speculating from their libraries and university chairs, they were in theory much freer to

34 Occasionally this was even openly stated: in his world chronicle, the Carolingian historian Freculph of Lisieux had praised Roman valor in the republican period, Smalley 1971: 167.
challenge established views and received wisdoms on the basis of newly discovered texts and of alternative interpretations. When it came to Roman imperialism, however, the books written by professional scholars essentially stayed within the boundaries of the basic paradigm defined by court apologists and ideologues in previous centuries. The only significant interpretive variation concerned the morality of the Roman conquest, rather than its nature or its mechanisms. College-educated writers like John of Salisbury may have been free to shake their head at the voraciousness of the expanding Romans, but they rarely had a broader intellectual horizon than the one defined by their far less sophisticated predecessors in the early Middle Ages.

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Aristotle-inspired philosophical school known as scholasticism had an important role in redefining and enriching the terms of the narratives about the Roman conquest. A close associate of Thomas Aquinas, Ptolemy of Lucca (c. 1236–1327), waxed ecstatically about the virtues of republican generals, and endowed them (in explicit contrast with the Augustinian vision) with a selfless patriotism that closely approached Christian charity. Similar views were held by the Florentine Dominican Remigio de’ Girolami (1235–1319), as well as by a scholastic of a stripe all his own, Dante Alighieri (c. 1265–1321). In the Monarchia, for instance, Dante clearly identifies as causes of Roman success military superiority, patriotism, political genius, and noble blood. Divine providence also had a hand in ensuring that the empire would perform its function as a vehicle for Christianity. Unlike his friend and mentor Brunetto Latini (or Ptolemy himself and other Tuscan humanists of his time), and despite his fervent admiration for the republican hero Cato the Younger, Dante was an uncompromising supporter of monarchy and of the Roman emperors, even if he deplored an excessive hunger for power. As historical reflection and political thought began to part ways in this period, the triumphal rise of Rome’s empire became a classic topic of research and commentary. Another great poet, humanist and Rome-lover of the time, Petrarch (1304–1374), put it simply and succinctly when he said that all history was “nothing but the praise of Rome.” The German polymath abbot Engelbert of Admont (c. 1250–1331) ascribed Rome’s successes to defensive

36 Davis 1957; Davis 1987: 9–12; Blythe 2000.
37 Mazzotta 1993: 121–24. Significantly, this basic statement was singled out by Foucault as one of the foundations of dominant western historical thought, which he defined as ‘Jupiterian’, Foucault 1997: 52; Petrarch also enthused about the naïve attempt of Cola di Rienzo to establish another classically inspired commune in mid-fourteenth century Rome, Collins 2002.
wars, voluntary surrenders and benign policies, which made its rule legitimate and beneficial.\textsuperscript{38}

With the approach of the Renaissance, learned Italian humanists progressively developed a proper school of historical thought endowed with considerable intellectual sophistication. While it was still rooted in the medieval literature, it would go on to be extremely influential on modern works, thanks also to the much wider availability of its published books. The Florentine Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406) played a seminal role in founding a circle of scholars with specific interests in the history of politics.\textsuperscript{39} Extolling, like Ptolemy, the Roman Republic, he interestingly reserved some praise for the small republican states of pre-Roman Italy, and especially for the Etruscan cities of his native Tuscany. This is a theme that would resurface here and there in the following centuries, providing a counterpoint to Romano-centric historiography.\textsuperscript{40} Salutati’s work set the stage for the debate that flourished in Florence during the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It would reach its high mark with Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), and from there it would pervade modern western culture. Another significant figure was the Arretine Leonardo Bruni (c. 1370–1444), who was Salutati’s disciple and succeeded him as chancellor of Florence. His book on the First Punic War drew heavily on Polybius, thus bringing the earliest interpreter of Roman imperialism back into the conversation, and intuiting that the true origins of the phenomenon resided in the great struggles of the Republic rather than in the deeds of Caesar or Trajan.\textsuperscript{41}

Another significant strand in the relationship that Renaissance culture had with ancient Rome is represented by the emergence of antiquarianism. Straddling the scholarly, artistic, and commercial spheres, learned men would write admiringly about classical antiquity from a variety of points of view. While a lot of their attention was devoted to ancient sculpture and architecture, Roman customs and institutions were also celebrated, with empire-building often taking center stage. Flavio Biondo (1392–1463) significantly titled one of his works \textit{De Roma triumphante}, in which two volumes are devoted to extolling the Roman military and its performance in the wars of expansion. Similar approaches can be found in other antiquarian writings, such as those of Rosinus or Sigonio.\textsuperscript{42} The contribution

\textsuperscript{38} Osiander 2007: 296–311.
\textsuperscript{40} Cipriani 1980.
\textsuperscript{42} Mazzocco 1985; Enenkel 2001.
that this tradition of Roman studies made to views of the conquest is particularly apparent in Lipsius’ *Admiranda sive De magnitudine Romana*. This long treatise in Latin is nothing short of a paean to the Roman soldier, his dedication, bravery, and selflessness. As befitted an erudite humanist, Justus Lipsius (1547–1606) focused on the Latin concept of *virtus* as a key ingredient for the victorious mentality of the conquerors.\(^{43}\) The Roman Empire was also used to exemplify the superiority of monarchy as a political system; indeed, expansionism was specifically applauded because it brought peoples together and homogenized them. The Catholic Lipsius had lived through the trauma of the Eighty Years’ War and the break-up of his native Netherlands. He was an ardent supporter of the Hapsburg Empire, and he dreamed of a Europe centered again on imperial and papal Rome. Once more, the eternal city was not only worshiped, but its memory was marshaled to make a political statement (in this case by a professional scholar) that was relevant to the contemporary situation.

The concept that the secret ingredient of Rome’s success was to be found in the republican period is definitively solidified in Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy*, published posthumously in 1531 and destined to have an enormous influence on European historical and political thought. In this book, the strategies employed in Roman republican imperialism were explicitly dissected so that they could be reproduced by contemporary statesmen. For instance, Machiavelli singled out the use of massive military force in short bursts and the settling of colonists on conquered lands as effective Roman policies. Other ones include some that evidently resonated with the contemporary situation, such as the refusal to employ mercenaries and the yearly turnover of commanders.\(^{44}\) The message was reiterated in other works, and especially in the *Prince*, one of the most widely read political science books of all time. Through the scholarship of Machiavelli and others, firm boundaries were set to the research on Roman imperialism for centuries to come. It became accepted that the main goal was to identify the strategies and motivations of the Romans to the exclusion of broader historical considerations. Precious elements of Roman mentality could only be gleaned and reconstructed from the ancient texts through a process of historical empathy. It is also definitively established that if one could only correctly determine what made the Romans great, the same strategies would ensure a comparable political triumph in any period and under any circumstances. Continuing the ideas propounded by many medieval apologists of empire,


in these works the Roman conquest was separated from ordinary history because it had been exceptional, but also, somewhat paradoxically, universally applicable. It was at once absolutely unique and a model for everyone else. By the same token, a tighter connection with contemporary political science and practice was created, one that would influence the professional study of Roman history down into the twentieth century.

A high-ranking politician that had both a theoretical and an applied interest in the Roman conquest was Francis Bacon (1561–1626). His essay on the True greatness of the kingdomes and estates made extensive use of the example of Rome to argue for Bacon's political ideas, especially with regard to Elizabethan England's own expansion. Building explicitly on Machiavelli's Discourses, Bacon advocated a citizen army as an essential ingredient of imperialism, when strengthened by a warlike disposition. He furthermore singled out the presence of a healthy yeomanry, the limitation of noble privilege, and the avoidance of the fine arts as key factors that make a nation strong. Rome would be a perfect model for all these desirable traits. Interestingly, he also discussed at some length Rome's generous policies towards conquered peoples, concluding cleverly that “it was not the Romans that spread upon the world, but it was the world that spread upon the Romans.”

This is an important theme that will reappear many times in the scholarship on Roman imperialism and that will have an important part in this book. It does not change the fact that, even for the inclusive Bacon, what the Romans did was the only historical phenomenon that was worthy of consideration and of imitation by those aspiring to “true greatness” in any time.

Needless to say, at this time British fascination (and identification) with Rome was only beginning. The Civil War and the Protectorate resulted in a renewed interest in republican constitutions and their effect on the power of states. Rome was conspicuously invoked both by royalists like Hobbes and by republicans like Harrington. In the eighteenth century, republican Romans would increasingly loom large in high culture, elite behavior and political opinion. The budding British Empire sought justification and ennoblement in the parallel with Rome's expansion and its wonderful civilizing effects, which included the creation of the province of Britannia itself. Among the intellectuals, a good example of the growing interest in

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47 Harrington went as far as envisioning a direct application of the Roman constitution to the British Isles, Millar 2002: 80–99.
48 Ayres 1997.
49 Hingley 2008: 157–236.
Roman imperialism as a political precedent can be found in the works of David Hume (1711–1776). An avid reader of Machiavelli, Hume seemed almost compelled to deal with the case of Rome to express his views about early modern England. He admired the civic discipline and the sense of duty of republican Romans, clearly indicating their value as role models and as supporting evidence for his proposed theory of political realism.\(^50\)

In Hume, however, we see one of the earliest appearances of the long-lived opinion that the Roman conquest had gone too far. In his estimation, the Romans had put together an impossibly large empire and therefore caused the collapse of that very republican system that had provided them with a competitive advantage in the first place. A perspective of this kind offered a justification for the contemporary British colonial focus, which was on trade and not yet on territorial expansion. It also explained the eventual dissolution of the Roman Empire as well as its creation. Hume’s views in this sense had a direct influence on Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and would have significant echoes in Romantic scholarship.\(^51\)

Across the Channel, Montesquieu (1689–1755) had been developing a detailed and comprehensive analysis of Roman imperialism in his 1734 work, *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur decadence*. As in Hume, the full cycle of conquest and collapse appeared as a single, long-term phenomenon that could only be understood in its entirety. In many ways, Montesquieu systematized and epitomized, in much greater detail than most of his predecessors, much of the early modern reflection on Rome. His work has been hailed as a turning point in the self-definition of historiography as a discipline.\(^52\)

Building on what was by then a long tradition, he explained the Roman military superiority with the alternation of the consuls, the constant fielding of their armies and the relentless dedication to war. Montesquieu’s Romans are animated by a “principle of war” that can only result in destruction or triumph. Then, by draining resources from the conquered peoples and slowly encroaching on the new lands with colonies and confiscations, the Romans would cunningly absorb entire economies without much destruction.\(^53\) Agreeing with Hume, Montesquieu pinned the blame for the collapse on excessive expansion, which led to the demise of the republican system.\(^54\) While setting an important standard for an interpretative analysis of history, Montesquieu

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\(^{50}\) Whelan 2004.


\(^{52}\) Senarclens 2003.

\(^{53}\) Frézouls 1983; Myers 1995.

also had a transparent political agenda that he thought the Roman example could best advance.\textsuperscript{55} This approach was even more evident in his contemporary Gabriel Mably (1709–1785), author of a *Parallèle des Romains et des Français*, in which he spurs his countrymen to emulate Rome’s glory.\textsuperscript{56}

Mably’s more famous younger brother, the philosopher Étienne de Condillac (1714–1780), on the other hand, authored an interesting indictment of Roman expansion. He agreed that they had a military and organizational edge over their weak opponents, but his overall historical judgment was very negative, primarily on ethical grounds. For Condillac, the Romans were an aggressive and despotic people, and should not be the object of admiration or emulation.\textsuperscript{57} His views were contained in a handbook of history that he wrote for his pupil, the young prince of Parma, and may have resonated with similar views held in eighteenth-century Italy, which was then fragmented into a number of small states like the Duchy where Condillac taught. Well before the nationalist surge of the Romantic period, the Roman conquest was negatively characterized by some Italian scholars as an extermination of non-Roman identities and the imposition of an iron-fisted central administration. For instance, a Neapolitan reader of Condillac, Giuseppe Galanti (1743–1806), deplored the demise of local Italian cultures, like that of the Samnites, at the hands of the Roman expansion. For this alternative school of thought, before Rome’s expansion Italy had enjoyed a golden age during which civilized and less aggressive communities coexisted in peace.\textsuperscript{58} Other Italian writers of the time, like Algarotti or Denina, were on the same wavelength. The mature fruit of this intellectual lineage is represented by Giuseppe Micali (1768–1844). His *L’Italia avant il dominio dei Romani* is entirely devoted to pre-Roman Italy, and takes an antithetical stance to the exaltation of the classical period.\textsuperscript{59} Celebrating the richness of local culture and traditions (a powerful and long-lived element throughout early modern Italian culture), he deplored the homogenization brought about by Rome in terms that echo the ‘nativist’ discourses in Tacitus and anticipate some current postcolonial formulations.\textsuperscript{60}

The growing critique of Roman imperialism reached its pinnacle in Johann Herder’s new philosophy of history. Influenced by Montesquieu’s disillusionment at the lasting value of the Roman Empire, Herder

\textsuperscript{55} Rahe 2005.
\textsuperscript{56} Wright 1997.
\textsuperscript{57} Desideri 1991: 604–05; Paganini 2007.
\textsuperscript{58} Marcone 2005.
\textsuperscript{59} Micali 1810; discussion in Whitfield 1979; Gabba 1994; Colombini 1998.
\textsuperscript{60} Mascioli 1942.
(1744–1803) painted the conquest in bleak colors, as an endless succession of brutal acts of aggression, deceptions, and annihilations. Again, the disappearance of local traditional cultures at the hands of Roman coercive centralization was denounced strenuously, this time from the perspective of a proto-Romantic fascination with popular traditions and folklore. In terms of Herder’s general view of human history, the Romans were starkly singled out as a paradigm of state brutality, perfectly illustrating the equation between “conquerors” and “man-hunters.” That such an inhuman system would eventually collapse was only natural, in fact it was history’s way of righting itself despite the perverse instincts of men. Herder’s indictment of Rome would occasionally resonate throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth century, for instance in Benjamin Constant’s dismissal of liberty in the ancient world. Clearly reacting against the French revolutionary and Napoleonic use of the analogy with Rome, Constant (1767–1830) condemned ancient imperialism, but was however prepared to admit that the Romans at least had had a civilizing effect in western Europe.

Thus, at the dawn of the age of professional ancient history, there had been many centuries of lively discourse on Roman imperialism. Most writers shared an enthusiastic admiration of its marvelous achievements, crediting it with a positive, even providential effect on human history. Ever since Tacitus and Augustine, however, there had been a flipside, a minority opinion that criticized some aspects of the conquest, such as its overreach, or even condemned it in its entirety. Almost always, at any rate, political points that were relevant to the contemporary situation were made through the reference to Rome, which consistently “played the role of miroir du siècle: it was a rhetorical tool, and the fuzziness of its content made it flexible enough to serve different causes.” The ubiquity of this simile across time and space in western culture needs to be underscored. It was as if no statement about contemporary politics, history or culture could be made without reference to Rome. For both schools of thought, at any rate, there were a number of basic axioms about Rome’s empire-building that were held as self-evident by virtually every one of the writers reviewed so far. There was no doubt that the Romans had initiated the conquest, that they had, at least for a while, dominated militarily over all other peoples, placing them in a subordinate position, and had spread their own culture

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63 Jenson 2001: 56–86.
everywhere. Most of the difference in scholarly opinion was limited to the ethical and historical judgment to be reached on the matter. So, when the first German ancient historians appeared on the scene, despite their claims to be strictly adhering to a critical reading of the original sources, they in fact found already solidly in place a millennium and a half of highly influential intellectual tradition.

The Advent of Scientific Historiography

A turning point in the trajectory taken by the discourse on the Roman conquest was represented by the emergence of ancient history as a specialty in the course of the nineteenth century. What had been until then the shared domain of philosophers, social scientists, pamphlet writers, and politicians was now claimed by a remarkably well-defined group of professional classical philologists, ancient historians, and Roman lawyers. Broad-ranging intellectuals, from Goethe and Flaubert to Freud and Arendt, continued to make occasional or specific references to Rome's imperialism, usually to make a larger point about human history, economy, or mind. But it became generally accepted (perhaps more so than for the study of other historical periods) that only scholars trained in Latin and Greek language and antiquities would have an authoritative voice in the debate. Such professionalization of classical studies has been hailed by some as progress towards more impartial and unbiased narratives, which would be exclusively based on a philological reading of the ancient literary texts. It can be provocatively argued instead that the influence of contemporary world views on the new generation of ancient historians was more powerful and pervasive than ever before, if perhaps subtler and harder to recognize. The analogy between Rome and contemporary European states very firmly underpinned the interpretation of the Roman conquest. The new orthodoxy led to the creation of textbook explanations sanctioned by specialists, to the exclusion of the exploration of alternative hypotheses.

The publication in the 1810s of Niebuhr’s *Römische Geschichte* is typically considered to have ushered in a new era in ancient studies, indeed as the very birth of a modern scientific Roman history. His work, however, was not unrelated to the debate that had been developing in late eighteenth-century France and Germany. Significantly, Barthold Niebuhr

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66 Niebuhr 1811–12; discussion in Christ 1972; Momigliano 1982.
67 The whole intellectual milieu is well reconstructed now in Holzer 2013.
(1776–1831) was also a politician and an ardent Prussian nationalist who made no secret of the links he saw between Rome and his motherland, especially in terms of the agrarian situation. Dissenting from Herder’s harsh judgment, Niebuhr, like Machiavelli before him, found solace from the bitter realities of the German situation after the defeat of Jena in the contemplation of the “great nation” that was ancient Rome. Clearly, his intention was to dissect Roman culture, and especially its civic and kinship institutions, to discover an organizational secret that could explain their superior capacity for national cohesion and empire-building. The impact of Niebuhr’s vision of Roman history on the discipline would be profound. As the first professor of ancient history at the newly founded University of Berlin, a post destined to be globally prominent in classical studies, he would come to be considered a founding father for the rich tradition of studies that came after him.

The construction of a distinctly Prussian view of Roman imperialism reached its maturity with Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903). Written in the aftermath of the 1848 troubles, Mommsen’s Römische Geschichte was even more explicit than Niebuhr’s in identifying Rome, rather than Greece, as the only role model that modern Germans should aspire to emulate. Just as Latin Rome had unified Italy, so Prussian Berlin would unify Germany, even at the price of bloodshed and misery. In Mommsen, empire-building and nation-building were essentially the same process, the only difference being that imperial expansion could easily go too far. Echoing Hume’s contention, Mommsen deplored that the conquest had not stopped at the Italian peninsula, arguing that Rome’s decadence had begun as soon as it had transcended its natural role as the unifier of Italians. The real reason for the decline, however, was not in the practical difficulties of administering a far-flung dominion but rather in the multi-ethnic nature necessarily displayed by large empires. Espousing the enthusiasm that Herder and other Romantics had for the concept of Volk, Mommsen maintained that only culturally homogeneous states could offer stability over the long term. Consequently, he tended to downplay the heterogeneity of ethnic groups in Italy, which he preferred to see as one people deep down, as a nation waiting to happen, like the Germany of his own time. In the same breath, however, he applauded the Roman conquest of Gaul as a positive step for

68 Yavetz 1976.
70 Mommsen 1854–6; discussion in Linderski 1984; Freeman 1997.
the civilization of Europe, laying the foundations for the colonialist views that developed in the late nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{71}

Another problem that Mommsen clearly struggled with, as someone who had been a liberal in his youth, had to do with the ethics of the conquest. If Augustine was right and greed had been the prime mover for expansion, then how could nation-building be morally justified? A philologist through and through, he found a solution in what the Latin writers themselves had to say about the process. Glossing over Polybius’ diagnosis of the phenomenon, Mommsen preferred to stick to the letter of Livy’s narrative and Cicero’s rhetoric, according to which the senate declared war almost exclusively in response to provocation or threat. Rome, in other words, had no imperialist agenda; the expansion, at least initially, simply resulted from Rome’s stellar success in dealing with its enemies and aggressors in the course of just wars. The senate would be a fragmented and factionalized body that could not implement a clear expansionist policy, but rather reacted to emergencies and concerns as they presented themselves. These concepts became the fundamental tenets of the theory of defensive imperialism, which was destined to enjoy a very large following in the specialist and as well as in the popular literature.\textsuperscript{72}

Even after the advent of professional ancient historians, there continued to be eminent thinkers, mostly philosophers, that exerted an influence upon the specialist debate on Rome. Albert Schwegler (1819–1857), for instance, had written extensively on early Rome and on its agrarian and military structures; echoes of his ideas can be found in the works of many classicists.\textsuperscript{73} Certainly, however, no German nineteenth-century thinker would have a deeper and longer-lasting impact on the discourse on Roman imperialism than Karl Marx (1818–1883), despite his devoting only very limited attention to classical antiquity. In his works, the Graeco-Roman world tended to remain in the background of his analyses, ready to be mentioned in support of a more general point but never the main focus of his research. After all, at seventeen, Marx had written a school essay in Latin discussing the reign of Augustus, a circumstance that should remind us of the central position that Rome had always retained in European education.\textsuperscript{74} As an adult political philosopher, in his \textit{Grundrisse}, he combined the observations made about land ownership in early Rome with his theory of economic growth and instability to provide a powerful new explanation

\textsuperscript{71} Frézouls 1983.

\textsuperscript{72} Duplá Ansuategui 2005.

\textsuperscript{73} Yavetz 1976; Martínez-Pinna 2005.

\textsuperscript{74} Baldwin 1988.
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for Roman wars and expansion. His emphasis on the role played by war-fueled slavery in Rome’s economic development laid the groundwork for establishing close links between the two phenomena. But it was his overall materialist interpretation of historical causation that in the long run had the longest-lasting effect on the debate, giving a whole other dimension and meaning to the lustful imperialist greed indicted by Augustine.

Another important component within the non-specialist debate in the later nineteenth century is represented by those who wrote about contemporary European colonialism, drawing explicit comparisons with Rome’s policies in its provinces. Especially in those nations, like France and England, that were quickly acquiring vast and far-flung dominions in Africa and Asia, it appeared natural to some observers to liken these dramatic new developments to the glorious expansion of the Roman Empire. In Britain, good examples are provided by the politicians and imperial administrators who wrote comparative works. The peer and jurist James Bryce (1838–1922) published *The Ancient Roman Empire and the British Empire in India*, detailing what he saw as similarities and differences between the two institutions. In both cases, Bryce argued, it was external dangers that drove the conquest forward, thus furnishing both empires with the ethical justification that is built into theories of defensive imperialism. Other British colonial administrators who wrote similar books in the early twentieth century include Charles Lucas and Lord Cromer (1841–1917). The latter was adamant, like Lipsius before him, that empires like the Roman and the British constituted the only possible barrier against anarchy and disruption. In all this discourse, in any case, a major concern resided with the cultural implications of the conquest, which reputedly resulted in a wholesale acculturation and civilization of the peoples conquered by Rome. This was in line with the political rhetoric of the time, which justified European colonialism by the moral imperative to civilize the local populations.

Contemporary colonial concerns also percolated in the specialist scholarship on the Roman Empire. For Francis Haverfield (1860–1919), who had been a collaborator of Mommsen, this was encapsulated in the concept of Romanization. For the first time, Haverfield systematically brought

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75 Marx 1939; In general, on the relevance of Marx’s *Grundrisse* on the ancient Mediterranean, Carandini 1979. The connection was made explicit in later Marxist writing, for instance in Lenin’s *Imperialism*; Barone 1985: 19.  
76 The question was picked up by Brunt (1965) during the Cold war; the debate is still active today, e.g., Smil 2010; Parchami 2009; a review in Vasunia 2011.  
77 Bryce 1914; the list of Victorians who engaged in the comparison with Rome is long, Vasunia 2005: 238–324; Hingley 2008.  
78 Majeed 1999.
archeological evidence to bear on the question, reaching the conclusion that even in a remote province like Britain the cultural influence of Rome had been extremely pervasive. He too likened this epoch-making phenomenon for western Europe to what western Europe itself was doing in Africa and Asia at the time, openly providing historical depth and context for British colonialist policies. On the continent, another scholar of Roman imperialism who was integrating archeological materials, this time in the Aegean, was Maurice Holleaux (1861–1932), a product of the École Normale, where Fustel de Coulanges and Durkheim taught. In his well-structured analysis of Rome’s policies in the East, Holleaux was eager to argue that they were completely justified given the provocations and threats in the region. The portrait gallery of early twentieth-century defensive imperialists could not omit the American Tenney Frank (1876–1939). In his 1914 *Roman Imperialism*, he placed the search for prime movers of the expansion squarely at the center of his inquiry. His conclusion was, once again, that Rome had been drawn into conflict and expansion by external circumstances, not unlike the United States had been in Cuba. Like many before and after him, Frank too reckoned that the Roman conquest had gone too far and too fast, a flaw that had eventually led to its collapse. From this, he drew a clear admonition for the foreign politics of the United States, seesawing between the doctrines of isolationism and manifest destiny.

Perhaps significantly, in countries where colonial expansion was not such a burning issue, the discourse on Rome’s imperialism took a more nuanced form. For instance in Italy, Gaetano De Sanctis (1870–1957) did consider the Roman unification of the peninsula a positive development, but deplored what followed it. He clearly had the Italian Risorgimento in the back of his mind when he described in his *Storia dei Romani* the process of merging together Italian peoples. Taking the critique of excessive imperialism to a new level, he attributed it exclusively to greed and aggressiveness. In particular, he wrote a harsh indictment of the Roman conquest of the Greek world, which he blamed for the tragic demise of the sublime culture of those lands. Not content with reaffirming the Humean notion that in wanton expansion resided the beginning of the end for the

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79 Haverafield 1905; discussion in Hingley 2000; Freeman 2007.
80 Holleaux 1921; Walbank 1963; Linderski 1984.
81 Frank 1914; discussion in Linderski 1984; Adler 2008.
82 Here there may have been an influence of the Italian philosopher G. Ferrero, who had lectured extensively in Theodore Roosevelt-era America and had published a book titled *Ancient Rome and modern America*; Polverini 1989.
empire, De Sanctis went further and essentially interpreted the whole parable of Rome as a process fraught with cruel violence and ending in disaster. Like many accusers of Rome before him, however, he had to concede that the conquest of the West had had a civilizing effect. In his teleological view, the empire's main contribution was to have paved the way for Christianity, but also to have offered a foil that the Church should have transcended, but largely failed to do. De Sanctis' old Russian friend and colleague, Mikhail Rostovtzeff (1870–1952), had a similarly negative view of the Roman Empire, which he saw as a disruptive machine undermining and thriving on the troubles of other states in the East. In him, one finds more than the simple Augustinian moral reprobation of imperialism, but rather the notion that it was a chaotic and entropic mechanism that took on a life of its own, spinning out of control almost as soon as it began. Things in Italy changed completely during the Fascist dictatorship, when Rome's expansion became a central aspect of the regime's propaganda. The tone of scholars was more guarded, as usual, but in historians like Plinio Fraccaro the exaltation of the civilizing impact of the conquest is evident.

Thus, some early twentieth-century views of Roman imperialism introduced the idea that there was something perverse and uncontrollable in the expansionist policies implemented by the senate. Probably influenced by the militaristic excesses and the frontline horrors of the First World War, they tended to explain Rome's constant campaigning with an urge that was inherent in their social or political structure. The theory of aggressive imperialism, which was destined to become very popular in the Cold War era, emerged in this context. As for economic imperialism, a non-specialist had an important role in its further definition at this time. The economist Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950) only devoted a handful of influential pages to the Roman Empire, but they succinctly conceptualized the mechanism that would drive Roman expansion. Dismissing any claims that Rome was really threatened or provoked to conflict, Schumpeter argued that pre-modern states run by a landed aristocracy needed constant war to reinforce their status, negotiate internal politics, and feed their slave-based productive structure. At the same time, he saw war as a sort of self-feeding disease that eventually led the whole structure to reach an unsustainable size and complexity. As in De Sanctis, the Roman elites ultimately failed to serve their own cause well because of the forces at play within their own

84 Gabba 1971.
85 Frézouls 1983.
86 Cagnetta 1979; Stone 1999; Arthurs 2012.
society. After the Second World War, the scholarship would elaborate and substantiate the positions expressed in the previous century, giving rise to one of the most intensely and hotly discussed historiographic exchanges on pre-modern events.

The Debate in the Last Few Decades

Discussing adequately the last sixty years of debate on Roman imperialism is, in some ways, even more daunting than reviewing the two thousand years that preceded them. Especially since the 1960s, perhaps not independently of the climate created by decolonization and by the Cold War, there has been an exponential increase in the amount and richness of the specialist scholarship. The classic arguments have been fleshed out in well-informed, monograph-length treatments, and new perspectives have been opened up, mainly in connection initially with the diffusion of materialist theories on the Continent, and then with the rise of postmodernism. The discourse has become much more closely integrated across scholarly traditions and national boundaries, thanks to conferences, edited volumes, and other forms of academic dialogue. At the same time, a certain amount of entrenchment and crystallization has been perceptible, as opposing schools of thought faced off repeatedly and tended to develop standard critiques of each other’s positions.

A considerable amount of astute, self-reflexive work has also been carried out, assessing, reviewing, and critiquing the recent and current scholarship. Most of those treatments have espoused in some form the well-established triple division into defensive, aggressive, and economic explanations for Roman imperialism. The existence of this literature fortunately makes a brief discussion of these basic views sufficient for the purposes of this book. The idea that the Romans were primarily reacting to threats, fears, and challenges is as old as the conquest itself, and it is also the first one to have been subject to a proper scholarly argumentation at the hands of early nineteenth-century German historians. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was restated and developed by historians like Frank Walbank (1909–2008) and especially Ernst Badian (1925–2011), who essentially argued that the senate simply lacked the tools to plan a grand strategy

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as well as the incentive to seek expansion in an active way. The assembly
instead simply responded, somewhat inconsistently depending on the situ-
ation, to outside stimuli.\footnote{Walbank 1963; Badian 1968. Critical review of defensive imperialism in Harris 1979: 163–74.} For Badian, expansionism is a universal human
trait and cannot be used to explain Rome’s particular behavior, while in
any case the cultural constraint of only fighting just wars would keep the
urge in check. Others, like Erich Gruen, go further in recognizing a distinct
greed for booty, glory, and revenue to Roman elites, but do not see a direct
connection with military policies actually implemented on the ground.\footnote{Gruen 1984a; Gruen 1984b.}
Particularly when considering the eastern Mediterranean, Gruen does not
deny that there were large amounts of resources that were drained towards
Rome as a result of the conquest, but he does not see any clear evidence that
this process played a determinant role in shaping the deliberations of the
senate.

The theory of aggressive imperialism too is as old as Polybius and was
propounded by many pre-modern writers, from Augustine to Herder. It
was however marginalized after Mommsen’s influential formulations, with
Schumpeter and De Sanctis as the most obvious exceptions, and only truly
revived in the 1970s, thanks primarily to the work of William Harris, whose
1979 War and Imperialism in Republican Rome constituted a true turning
point in the debate.\footnote{This was also building on a renewed interest for the Polybian interpretation of Roman
imperialism, e.g., Musti 1978; Gabba 1993.} In this influential book, the machinery of the Roman
political system is brought to the fore as the real prime mover of the pro-
cess: since military glory was essential to electoral success, elite Romans
were irresistibly drawn to constant new wars and expeditions. Loot also was
politically very useful, so the whole system was geared to breed more imperi-
alism and naturally select aggressive leaders, since they were more likely to
be reelected.\footnote{Harris 1979. It should be noted, however, that in an earlier paper Harris had left much more
space for the existence of an explicit economic agenda behind the conquest; Harris 1971a. He
comes back to this now; Harris 2016: 37–43.} It should be noted that in this version of the aggressive theory
there is still little or no deliberation in Rome about the conquest. Senators
and consuls needed victories for their careers, but they would have had no
overall strategy of domination across the Mediterranean. In this sense, as is
the case with the defensive approach of Gruen, these explanations are sig-
nificantly compatible with a primitivist view of the ancient economy, one
in which the Romans lacked the cultural and mental framework required
to initiate their expansion for a more generalized economic advantage. In
much the same vein proceed some studies that look specifically at Rome’s expansion in the East or in the West. Indeed, aggressive theories appear to be particularly favored when dealing with far-flung conquests that happened after the defeat of Carthage, as if these were more difficult to explain with the presence of threats to Rome. After all, Mommsen himself had considered expansion beyond Italy as unnecessary, therefore less justifiable, in a way suggesting that, in his mind, fear of aggression was a more fitting explanation for the early part of the conquest.

In 1968, Badian’s reaffirmation of defensive imperialism was expressly aimed at correcting the errors of “a generation nourished on Marx.” It should be noted in passing that Marxism, although politically and culturally on the rise in the broader world, had at that point not been applied to the scholarship on Roman imperialism in any systematic way. It was only in the 1970s and 1980s that, especially on the Continent, a sustained effort was made at interpreting the historical phenomenon in stricter materialist terms. In this new analytical effort, looting, taxation, and confiscations were considered to have had only a minor impact on the economics of the conquest. Building for the first time on the results of a wealth of new archeological fieldwork that had been accumulating for decades, these scholars posited the existence of a de facto causal connection between the expansion of Rome and the economic development of the late Republic and early Empire. Thus, even if this was hardly ever articulated by any contemporary observer, in this school of thought the real goals of the conquest were the expansion of the market economy, the exploitation of natural resources, and the establishment of a slave mode of production. This approach (in line with the Marxian contention that the material forces at work in shaping history are often invisible and actively obfuscated) sidestepped entirely the question of senatorial decision-making in favor of a basic cui bono approach: since the classes that benefited the most from the conquest were the commercial and industrial ones, they must ultimately have driven the process forward in some way that is hard for us to

94 Derow 1979; Richardson 1986; Loreto 2007. A work that has been particularly influential outside classical circles is Luttewak 1976.
95 Badian 1968: 18. There is no reference explaining who Badian had in mind when he wrote this. The paramount Marxist ancient historian in 1960s England (where Badian was based at the time) was of course Moses Finley, who however emphatically denied any economic motivation for the conquest (e.g., Finley 1973: 21) in terms that Badian would have most likely subscribed to. Discussion now in Adler 2008; Harris 2013.
96 The argument is developed in full in Giardina and Schiavone 1981; see also Tchernia 1986; Carandini 1988; Love 1991; Andreau 2003. Their idea was building on what had already been outlined by earlier scholars, Rostovtzeff 1926; Salvioli 1929. It is present also in T. Frank’s works.
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detect. Needless to say, this edifice relied on a modernist view of the ancient economy, which saw imperial Rome as the closest pre-modern approximation of capitalism. Connected with this approach is a whole set of studies that has been seeking to apply postcolonial theory to the Roman Empire. Although often primarily concerned with the cultural changes prompted by the conquest, these reconstructions operate under the assumption that economic exploitation of the provinces was at the root of the expansion process.

For a while therefore, the arguments about Roman imperialism have tended to revolve around the three fundamental interpretations with only a few variants, consistently repeating the same formulations and critiques of opposing views. Progressively in recent decades, however, there have been attempts to revitalize the debate by pushing it outside the established discursive framework, exploring new avenues and asking new questions of the existing data. For a long time, the issue that received the lion’s share of attention was to determine the impulse that had driven the Romans on the path of war and conquest. Other equally important problems were overshadowed, such as what had made the expansion so successful and long-lived, whether there were differences in the phenomenon across time and space, or what were the direct consequences of it, to name just a few. In other words, the spotlight has remained fixed on the Romans, on their decision-making process, on their economy, on their worldview or on their fears and emotions. During this period, however, there have been some original contributions that have attempted to combine the different models and emphasized the heterogeneity of the expansion. Yet others have instead deepened the analysis of the thought process leading the Romans to push forward their boundaries. A long essay by Paul Veyne has tried to reconstruct the mentality behind the drive for universal conquest, building on structuralist approaches. And it should be remembered that an alleged


An idea fervently opposed by most of the English-speaking scholarship at the time, but which now seem to have been gaining ground; Scheidel, Morris and Saller 2007.

A concept introduced by Bénabou 1976 and successively developed, especially in the context of the western and southern provinces in Webster 1994; Webster 2001; Mattingly 2011. For Italy, van Dommelen 1998.

E.g., North 1981, which criticizes Harris’ assumption that senatorial action was not constrained by a host of other factors, or Rich 1995, which wonders whether monocausal explanations can ever account for the problem in its entirety.

Veyne 1975. Interestingly, this was originally a paper for a seminar led by that same Aron, who had himself remarked on the stability introduced by the conquest (Aron 1962: 221–22), in replying to the moral indignation of Weil that had likened Rome to Hitler’s Germany; Weil 1940; also, Desideri 1991: 595–98; Nevin 1991: 136–37, 325.
innate Roman warrior ethos figures prominently in Harris and other aggressive imperialism proponents too. A role has also been assigned to physical violence, to its omnipresence and to the attempts to regulate and monopolize it as the Roman state was emerging. One can almost perceive a tendency to psychoanalyze the Romans and identify the recondite forces that may explain their extraordinary behavior.

Another recent trend has involved extending our gaze to look at the broader context of the Roman conquest. For instance, in analyzing the interplay between second-century BCE Mediterranean powers, Arthur Eckstein has taken into account the actions of other contemporary empires, emphasizing the complex dynamics of the entire political system. Arguing against any particular bellicosity of the Romans, he has suggested instead that the overall political situation in the region could have been conducive to the emergence of a superpower. A number of recent studies of a similar ilk have also downplayed the role of war and have looked instead at the contributions made by diplomatic exchanges, alliances, friendship, and other forms of interaction between states, often considering the ethical limitations that placed boundaries to the actions of the expanding states.

The constraints posed by the environment, by the human geography, and by the demography of the Mediterranean have also been brought to bear on the process, providing valuable insights. In a similar way, other material factors, such as population pressures, economic changes, or even climatic ones have been considered as potential causes that do not originate within Rome itself.

Much less attention has been paid, on the whole, to the reasons behind the stellar success of Rome’s expansion. Even if it was an important question for many pre-modern interpreters, starting with Polybius, determining why the Romans had prevailed has not been a primary goal of the scholarship and has often been left to global comparative syntheses and popular history books. It is perhaps revealing that most scholars have seemed to take it

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102 Harris 1979: 9–53; critique in Raaflaub 1996.
104 For instance, in some works Harris seems inclined to assign a role to another Roman emotion instead of fear, namely anger; Harris 2001. The effects of the trauma of defeats and raids are considered in Raaflaub 1996, and recently it has hypothesized that Roman leaders may have suffered from a form of PTSD; Eich 2015: ch. 22.
105 Eckstein 2006.
106 Auliard 2006a; Caire and Pittia 2006; Eilers 2009; Burton 2011; Lomas 2012.
107 Horden and Purcell 2000; Rosenstein 2004.
109 E.g., Turchin 2006; Scheidel 2009a; overview in Vasunia 2011.
for granted that, whatever their motivations, once the Romans sprang into action, they naturally prevailed over their opponents, implicitly accepting views that were already current in the times of Machiavelli or Montesquieu. The military superiority described by Polybius has often been invoked as the primary factor that gave an edge to the expanding empire, especially in the countless works devoted to the Roman army. Another Polybian favorite, Rome’s political system, has sometimes been brought into the picture, for instance remarking upon its inclusiveness, manifested in the ability to seamlessly incorporate conquered peoples within the imperial amalgam. When considering expansion into western and central Europe, it is often pointed out that the Romans possessed superior technology and, more generally, a higher level of cultural complexity. In that context, the related question of why the expansion stopped when it did has also occasionally cropped up, especially in books by later prehistorians, who have tended to conclude that the push petered out when it ran out of compatible societies to engulf. For them, the conquest could never work in those areas of temperate Europe where social complexity had not progressed enough.

While a bit simplistic, these reflections on Roman imperialism based on its absence, so to speak, have had the undeniable merit of considering the agency of non-Roman polities as a significant variable in the causation of the process, something that has hardly ever happened in the rest of the literature.

In concluding such a broad-ranging review, it should be evident what the main contention advanced here is. Despite two millennia of enormously rich discourse on Roman imperialism, there are still significant areas that remain underexplored. The most conspicuous is surely the broader context in which the conquest took place. From the very beginning, Roman actions have received a completely disproportionate share of the attention, and their motivations and strategies have been endlessly dissected, without a truly alternative perspective. In this sense, it makes little difference that, at times, from Augustine to the postcolonialists, there have been sharp condemnations of those actions, since these otherwise subversive voices have not changed our substantive understanding of the process, but just our moral judgment of it. Only very rarely have the role and the behavior of non-Romans been considered to be a determinant political factor. While the textual material is skewed in favor of the Romans, archeology and

110 Goldsworthy 2003; Southern 2006; Phang 2008; but also in Harris 2016: 43–44.
111 E.g., Cornell 1995; Nicolet 1997.
epigraphy have made contributions that enable us to begin rebalancing our perspective. Relying on local evidence, it is possible to determine who actually benefited from the conquest. Approaches of this kind can free the discourse from the philological tyranny of staying within the limits of what the sources say happened, allowing for the possibility that forces invisible to ancient writers, but not necessarily to us, may have been at play. Our gaze can finally be averted from the specific event of the Roman military campaign as told by Livy to the conjunctures and the long-term trends that bookended the conquest. Reflecting holistically may reveal preexisting conditions that shaped the outcome of expansion, as well as distant consequences that illuminate otherwise shadowy mechanisms that must have had a role.113

Furthermore, building on critiques of monocausal interpretations, as well as on attempts at breaking down the process across space and time, it should be possible to deploy a more context-sensitive reading of the Roman conquest that makes space for a variety of models which account for different one-to-one relationships between Rome and the communities that were being incorporated by them. Another important dimension, seldom explored in the literature, is the variability of behaviors and responses across different sociological groups. The Romans and the polities and ethnic groups they encountered have often been treated as if they were single-minded modern warring national states. Instead, the presence of factions and social hierarchies made the phenomenon even more complicated, sometimes leading to the rise of interest groups that cut across civic and other boundaries. In a related area, new theories that break down the Hobbesian view of states as monopolists on power and violence can also open up new and unexpected insights into the real forces at work in the process. The remainder of this book ambitiously attempts to combine all these perspectives into an experimental new reading of the early phases of the Roman conquest, turning some assumptions on their head and challenging a received wisdom that has been with us since the time of Cicero.

113 Perceptive overview in Stek 2014.