

# **Roman Empire: The Paradox of Power**

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## **Changing views of the Roman model**

A gap of 2,000 years may seem to have put the Romans at a safe distance from our own lives and experience, but modern Europe with its Union is unthinkable without the Roman Empire. It is part of the story of how we came to be what we are.

The Romans are important as a conscious model, for good or ill, to successive generations. Why do they have such a powerful hold on our imaginations? What attracts us to them, or repulses us? What do they have in common with us, and what makes them different?

A century ago, for imperialist Britain (and for other European states with imperial ambitions), the Roman Empire represented a success story. Rome's story of conquest, at least in Europe and around the Mediterranean, was imitated, but never matched, by leaders from Charlemagne to Napoleon. The dream that one could not only conquer, but in so doing create a Pax Romana, a vast area of peace, prosperity and unity of ideas, was a genuine inspiration.

But the efforts of 20th-century dictators such as Mussolini, peculiarly obsessed with the dream of reviving an empire centered on Rome, left Europe disillusioned with the Roman model. The dream of peace, prosperity and unity survives, but Roman style conquest now seems not the solution but the problem. Centralized control, the suppression of local identities, the imposition of a unified system of beliefs and values - let alone the enslavement of conquered populations, the attribution of sub-human status to a large part of the workforce, and the deprivation of women of political power - all now spell for us not a dream but a nightmare.

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## **Fascination in the emperors**

So is the Roman Empire a legacy of mistakes? That depends on what we want to make of it. One image of the imperial system is of strong, effective central control. The figure of the emperor himself, as defined by Julius Caesar and Augustus, stands for good order in contrast to the chaos of pluralism - squabbling city-states or competing aristocrats.

Historians have underlined the benefits of provincial government restrained by imperial control and the development of a sophisticated and complex law code which still underlies continental legal systems. They have pointed to the benefits of the central bureaucracy built up by the early emperors, especially Claudius, which provided a structure for long-term continuity amid changing dynasties. That bureaucratic mentality, you could say, transmitted from late antiquity through the papacy to modern nation states, is what makes contemporary Brussels possible.

But look at the figures of the Caesars themselves and what fascinates us now is their arbitrary nature. We see not an efficient system of fair and sober government, but a gamble at work. From Augustus's ruthless intelligence, to Caligula's scary insanity, or Nero's misplaced parade

of rock star popularity, we seem to be dealing with a system which throws the individual and his personal foibles into excessive prominence.

The 'mad' and 'bad' Caesars seem more interesting than the good, sober ones - certainly, from *Quo Vadis* to *I Claudius* to *Gladiator*, they are the ones who have fired the popular imagination. It is as if we do not want to learn the secret of Roman success, but scare ourselves by looking deep into the irrationality of an apparently successful system. In that sense, the Caesars now serve us not as a model of how people ought to rule but a mythology through which we reflect on the terrifying power of the systems in which we may happen to find ourselves entrapped.

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### **A slave society**

One element, which perhaps more than others seems to separate our world from that of the Roman Empire, is the prevalence of slavery which conditioned most aspects of Roman society and economy. Unlike American plantation slavery, it did not divide populations of different race and color but was a prime outcome of conquest.

Again, we find ourselves gazing back at the Roman world not as a model, but as an alien and terrifying alternative. No concept here of human rights: slavery required the systematic use of physical punishment, judicial torture and spectacular execution. From the crucifixion of rebel slaves in their thousands to the use of theatrical enactments of gruesome deaths in the arena as a form of entertainment, we see a world in which brutality was not only normal, but a necessary part of the system. And since the Roman economy was so deeply dependent on slave labor, whether in chained gangs in the fields, or in craft and production in the cities, we cannot wonder that modern technological revolutions driven by reduction of labor costs had no place in their world.

But while this offends against the core values on which the modern world is based, brutality and human rights abuses are not limited to the past. Enough to think of the stream of refugees struggling to break into the fortunate zones of Europe, and recall that the Roman empire collapsed in the West because of the relatively deprived struggling to get in, not out.

The system that seems to us manifestly intolerable was in fact tolerated for centuries, provoking only isolated instances of rebellion in slave wars and no significant literature of protest. What made it tolerable to them? One key answer is that Roman slavery legally allowed freedom and the transfer of status to full citizen rights at the moment of manumission.

Serried ranks of tombstones belonging to *liberti* (freed slaves, promoted to the master class), who flourished (only the lucky ones put up such tombs) in the world of commerce and business, indicate the power of the incentive to work with the system, not rebel against it. Trimalchio, the memorable creation of Petronius's *Satyricon*, is the caricature of this phenomenon. Roman society was acutely aware of its own paradoxes: the freedmen and slaves who served the emperors became figures of exceptional power and influence to whom even the grandees had to pay court.

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## **Pulling together diverse cultures**

One of the most astonishing features of the Roman Empire is the sheer diversity of the geographical and cultural landscapes it controlled. It was a European empire in the sense that it controlled most of the territory of the member states of the present EU, except part of Germany and Scandinavia.

But it was above all a Mediterranean empire, and pulled together diverse cultures, in Asia (the Near East), Egypt and North Africa that have not been reunited since the spread of Islam. This represented a vast diversity, including language (two 'international' languages were still needed for communication, Greek as well as Latin, let alone local languages) and relative development - they spoke of 'barbarians' versus Romans/Greeks, where we would speak of first and third world. The planting of cities, with their familiar apparatus of public services and entertainment, was a sign and instrument of the advance to 'first-world' status.

But while we can still admire the effectiveness of this city-based 'civilization' in producing unity and common cultural values in diverse societies, what we might look for from a contemporary perspective, and look for in vain, is some conscious encouragement of the 'biodiversity' of the different societies that composed the empire.

Vast regional contrasts did indeed continue, but there is little sense that the emperors felt an obligation to promote or protect them. The unity of the empire lay in a combination of factors. The central machine was astonishingly light compared to modern states - neither the imperial bureaucracy nor even the military forces were large by modern standards. The central state in that sense weighed less heavily on its component parts, which were largely self-governing.

But above all the unity lay in the reality of participation in central power by those from the surrounding regions. Just as the emperors themselves came not just from Rome and Italy, but Spain, Gaul, North Africa, the Danubian provinces, and the Near East, so the waves of economic prosperity spread over time outwards in ripples.

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## **Common values unifying the empire**

The unified empire depended on common values, many of which could be described as 'cultural', affecting both the elite and the masses. Popular aspects of Graeco-Roman literary culture spread well beyond the elite, at least in the cities. Baths and amphitheaters also reached the masses. It has been observed that the amphitheater dominated the townscape of a Roman town as the cathedral dominated the medieval town.

The underlying brutality of the amphitheater was compatible with their own system of values and the vision of the empire as an endless struggle against forces of disorder and barbarism. The victims, whether nature's wild animals, or the human wild animals - bandits, criminals, and the Christians who seemed intent on provoking the wrath of the gods - gave pleasure in dying because they needed to be exorcised.

There was also a vital religious element which exposed the limits of tolerance of the system. The pagan gods were pluralistic, and a variety of local cults presented no problem. The only cult, in any sense imposed, was that of the emperor. To embrace it was as sufficient a symbol of loyalty as saluting the flag, and rejecting it was to reject the welfare of all fellow citizens.

Christians were persecuted because their religion was an alternative and incompatible system (on their own declaration) which rejected all the pagan gods. Constantine, in substituting the Christian god for the old pagan gods, established a far more demanding system of unity.

We are left with a paradox. The Roman Empire set up and spread many of the structures on which the civilization of modern Europe depends; and through history it provided a continuous model to imitate. Yet many of the values on which it depended are the antithesis of contemporary value-systems. It retains its hold on our imaginations now, not because it was admirable, but because despite all its failings, it held together such diverse landscape for so long.