

Imperialism in the Roman Republic European Problem Studies



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"It was not by accident or without knowing what they were doing that the Romans boldly struck out for universal dominion and rule--and accomplished their aim." The words were penned by the Greek historian Polybius writing at the conclusion of more than a century of Roman expansion and conquest. By 134 B.c. that lengthy but concentrated burst of activity had made Rome the unchallenged mistress of the Mediterranean. To Polybius, who observed a dominion that was secure and to all appearances complete, it was all logical and obvious. Fate had willed it; Rome had executed it.

Hindsight is the most seductive of historical faculties--and the most misleading. In 265, before Rome's first overseas venture, few Romans would have predicted or anticipated the conversion of the Mediterranean into a Roman lake. The "manifest destiny" might be acknowledged in retrospect; it was not postulated in advance. Imperium is a Latin word, but imperialism is a modern concept. The difference is significant and revealing. Rome created an empire, but she did not theorize about it. Wars needed to be justified, for the gods could not condone aggressive hostilities unless undertaken out of self-defense. But dominion following upon conquest was taken for granted. It received no elaborate explanations and elicited few misgivings. Cicero might criticize Asia for groaning under the burden of Roman taxes when Rome had brought peace and security to an area torn by endemic civil strife. But that too was hindsight. Similarly, when Virgil wrote that Rome's mission was "to spare the subjected and humble the haughty," he was looking upon an empire already fully formed. But Rome had launched her expansion without missionary zeal, without a self-conscious plan to civilize the world, without the comforting illusion of a "white man's burden." Nineteenth-century Britain may have been buoyed by a sense of superiority, a drive to bring superior culture to the "underdeveloped." Rome embarked on expansion with no such ambitions or illusions. The civilization of Carthage was at least as old as that of Rome. Greek civilization was much older. The Roman sense of superiority was the product of, not the motive for, war and conquest.

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