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ROME AS IMPERIAL MIRROR:

**THE MYTH, LEGACY, AND POLITICAL USES OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE FROM
MACHIAVELLI TO CONTEMPORARY DEBATES ON AMERICAN DECLINE**

ROMA COME PARADIGMA IMPERIALE:

IL MITO, L'EREDITÀ E GLI USI POLITICI DELL'IMPERO ROMANO DA MACHIAVELLI AI
DIBATTITI CONTEMPORANEI SUL DECLINO AMERICANO.

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Abstract

Long after its collapse, the Roman Empire refused to remain in the past. Renaissance republics, revolutionary assemblies, colonial administrators, Fascist demagogues, and anxious American commentators have all reached, almost reflexively, for the same vanished empire to explain themselves to themselves. This thesis takes that recurrence as its problem and asks how the Roman Empire has been received, reinterpreted, and mythologized in modern and contemporary political thought in order to legitimize, to criticize, or to narrate imperial power in international politics.

Its central claim is that Rome functions as a *political myth in the service of international order*: a flexible narrative supplying ready-made categories of legitimate authority, natural hierarchy, and justified force that need not be argued from first principles. The governing image is the imperial *mirror*—those who look to Rome find their own features reflected back, magnified by antiquity, so that to compare one's polity to Rome is already to make a claim about what it is entitled to do. Crucially, the myth's versatility was manufactured in antiquity itself: Livy, Sallust, Polybius, Virgil, Cicero, and Tacitus bequeathed competing templates from which later actors selectively retrieve.

Working in the contextualist tradition of the history of international political thought, and treating monuments and rituals as political arguments alongside texts, the thesis tests this claim through six cases of escalating stakes: Machiavelli's expansionist republic, Gibbon's invention of imperial decline, Napoleon between republic and empire, the British civilizing imperium in India, the totalitarian Romes of Fascism and Nazism, and contemporary American declinism. The constancy of these operations across five centuries and radically different regimes is itself the strongest evidence that what is at work is myth rather than analysis; and that the mirror's distortion, not its fidelity, is the true source of its enduring power.

Abstract (Italiano)

Molto tempo dopo il suo crollo, l'Impero Romano ha rifiutato di rimanere nel passato. Repubbliche rinascimentali, assemblee rivoluzionarie, amministratori coloniali, demagoghi fascisti e inquieti commentatori americani hanno tutti fatto ricorso, quasi per riflesso, al medesimo impero scomparso per spiegare sé stessi a sé stessi. Questa tesi assume tale ricorrenza come proprio problema e si interroga su come l'Impero Romano sia stato recepito, reinterpretato e mitizzato nel pensiero politico moderno e contemporaneo, al fine di legittimare, criticare o narrare il potere imperiale nella politica internazionale.

La tesi centrale è che Roma funzioni come un mito politico al servizio dell'ordine internazionale: una narrazione flessibile che fornisce categorie già pronte di autorità legittima, gerarchia naturale e forza giustificata, categorie che non necessitano di essere argomentate ogni volta a partire da principi primi. L'immagine guida è quella dello specchio imperiale: chi guarda a Roma vi ritrova le proprie fattezze riflesse, amplificate dall'antichità, cosicché paragonare la propria compagine politica a Roma equivale già a rivendicare ciò a cui essa ha diritto. È decisivo notare che la versatilità del mito fu costruita già nell'antichità: Livio, Sallustio, Polibio, Virgilio, Cicerone e Tacito hanno tramandato modelli concorrenti ai quali gli attori successivi selettivamente attingono.

Operando nella tradizione contestualista della storia del pensiero politico internazionale, e considerando monumenti e rituali come argomenti politici al pari dei testi, il lavoro verifica questa proposizione attraverso sei casi di posta in gioco crescente: la repubblica espansionista di Machiavelli, l'invenzione Gibboniana del declino imperiale, Napoleone tra repubblica e impero, l'imperium civilizzatore britannico in India, le Rome totalitarie del Fascismo e del Nazismo, e il declinismo americano contemporaneo. La costanza di queste operazioni attraverso cinque secoli e regimi radicalmente diversi costituisce essa stessa la prova più solida che ciò che è in gioco è un mito piuttosto che un'analisi; e che la distorsione dello specchio, non la sua fedeltà, è la vera fonte della sua persistente potenza.

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Introduction

I.1 Research Question

Long after the last emperor was deposed, Rome refused to die. It outlived its own collapse to become the West's most persistent political idea, summoned again and again by regimes that shared little except the conviction that their own power could be measured against it. Renaissance republics, revolutionary assemblies, colonial administrators, Fascist demagogues, and anxious American commentators have all reached for the same vanished empire to explain themselves to themselves. This recurrence (the fact that so many different actors, facing such different problems, have turned almost reflexively to the same ancient referent) is the phenomenon from which this thesis takes its departure. Its central question is the following: *how has the Roman Empire been received, reinterpreted, and mythologized in modern and contemporary political thought in order to legitimize, to criticize, or to narrate imperial power in international politics?*

The question brackets the antiquarian problem of what Rome *was* and foregrounds the political problem of what Rome has been made to *mean*. It treats Rome as a symbolic resource¹ continually reworked to serve the needs of those who reach for it. The wager of the thesis, defended in its opening chapter, is that this work is best understood through the category of *political myth*: a narrative about the past that does work for a community independently of its accuracy.² Two subsidiary questions follow. The first is explanatory: *why does Rome, rather than any other vanished empire, remain the privileged historical analogue for imperial power?* Egypt, Persia, Byzantium, and the Ottomans were all available,

¹ On the methodological priority of reception over reconstruction in the study of the classical tradition, see Catharine Edwards, ed., *Roman Presences: Receptions of Rome in European Culture, 1789–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1–18.

² The analytical, non-pejorative concept of political myth adopted here derives principally from Chiara Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), and Christopher Flood, *Political Myth: A Theoretical Introduction* (New York: Garland, 1996); the foundational formulations remain Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), and Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 [1908]).

yet none has rivalled Rome's grip on the Western political imagination: partly through the centrality of Latin and classical education in the formation of European and American elites,³ partly because the Romans themselves bequeathed several competing ones. The second question is political: *how and why do different actors select different Romes?* There is the austere republic and the glittering empire, Rome ascendant and Rome in decline, Rome as model of liberty and Rome as warning against corruption. A revolutionary, a monarch, a colonial administrator, and an American essayist retrieve different objects from the same archive. Showing that these selections are neither arbitrary nor innocent, but track the legitimating needs of each actor and the international order he inhabits, is a principal task of this study.

I.2 Why Rome Matters for International Political Thought

The Roman analogy might seem to belong to cultural history rather than to the study of international politics. It does not. Empire is a way of ordering relations between people, of arranging hierarchy across political space, and of justifying authority beyond the community that exercises it. When modern actors invoke Rome, they are rarely asking how to govern themselves at home; they are making claims about their place in the world and their right to rule others.

The Roman myth has accordingly performed a consistent set of legitimating operations directed outward: it naturalizes expansion, presenting empire as destiny rather than choice; it reframes hierarchy as order, recasting the subordination of others as the gift of civilization and peace; and it sanctifies the violence of foundation, dignifying conquest with the prestige of antiquity.⁴ Each

³ On the role of Latinity and classical pedagogy in sustaining Rome's privileged status, see Françoise Waquet, *Latin, or the Empire of a Sign: From the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 2001); and Christopher Stray, *Classics Transformed: Schools, Universities, and Society in England, 1830–1960* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

⁴ These three recurrent operations (naturalizing expansion, reframing hierarchy as order, and sanctifying foundational violence) are theorized in Chapter 1 and traced through the case studies. For the Augustan template from which they descend, see Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), and Karl Galinsky, *Augustan Culture: An Interpretive Introduction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

is an operation upon the international, and each recurs across the cases examined here.

Rome also bequeathed modern thought its grammar of decline. It was Edward Gibbon who turned Rome from a stock of exemplary episodes into a *trajectory*, a single arc from virtuous origins through corrupting success to collapse⁵, and so gave international thought one of its most durable and dangerous figures: the idea that great powers possess natural life cycles, and that statesmanship consists in reading the symptoms of decay before it is too late. The persistence of “decline” in contemporary geopolitics, from theories of imperial overstretch to alarms about American decadence, is unintelligible without this Gibbonian pedigree.⁶

I.3 Thesis Argument

The thesis advances a single proposition: that Rome functions in modern and contemporary political thought as a *political myth in the service of international order*: a flexible narrative supplying ready-made categories of legitimate authority, natural hierarchy, and justified force that need not be argued from first principles. Its governing image, named in the title, is the imperial *mirror*: those who look to Rome find their own features reflected back, magnified by antiquity, so that to compare one’s polity to Rome is already to make a claim about what it is entitled to do.⁷

Three corollaries follow. First, the malleability of the myth was manufactured in antiquity itself: Livy and Sallust, Virgil and Tacitus fashioned competing versions of what Rome meant, and it is this plurality that later actors

⁵ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley (London: Penguin, 1994); the decisive intellectual context is reconstructed in J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion, Vol. 1: The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon, 1737–1764* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁶ The genealogy and political uses of the decline narrative are surveyed critically in Edward J. Watts, *The Eternal Decline and Fall of Rome: The History of a Dangerous Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁷ The image of Rome as a mirror that returns the observer’s own features—“the eagle in the mirror”—is borrowed from Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), whose argument anchors the final chapter.

exploit.⁸ In a sense, antiquity supplied a set of tools. Second, the selection among those parts is systematic: whether an actor reaches for the republic or the empire tracks the legitimating task he faces and his position in the international order of his day. Machiavelli's expansionist republic, Napoleon's universal empire, the civilizing imperium of the Victorians, the totalitarian *romanità* of Mussolini and the racial Rome of National Socialism, and the cautionary Rome of American declinism are five disciplined retrievals from a common archive. Third, this is not a story of progressive enlightenment: the same operations recur across centuries and regimes, which is itself the strongest evidence that what is at work is myth rather than analysis. What the thesis must explain is therefore the endurance of the analogy, not merely its content.

I.4 Method and Approach

The method is that of the history of international political thought, practiced comparatively and in context. It proceeds neither by abstract theory nor by antiquarian detail, but by close reading of representative episodes in which Rome was put to political work, set within the circumstances that gave each its meaning. The approach is indebted to the contextualist tradition of the Cambridge school, which reads political texts as interventions in particular debates rather than timeless contributions to perennial questions,⁹ but it treats images, monuments, and rituals as bearers of political argument alongside texts, since the Roman myth travelled as much through arches and coronations as through treatises. Although the cases follow a chronological order, from the early sixteenth century to the present, the argument advanced is analytical in character: each chapter identifies a distinct configuration of the myth, standing in continuity with some and in

⁸ On the construction of divergent "Romes" within the ancient tradition itself, see Alain M. Gowing, *Empire and Memory: The Representation of the Roman Republic in Imperial Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), and Daniel J. Kapust, *Republicanism, Rhetoric, and Roman Political Thought: Sallust, Livy, and Tacitus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁹ For the methodological commitments of contextual intellectual history drawn on here, see Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and the classic study of the republican tradition in J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

discontinuity with others, such that the sequence of chapters as a whole traces the trajectory along which the political uses of the Roman myth evolved.

I.4.1 Organization of the Thesis

Chapter 1 lays the theoretical foundations. It develops the concept of political myth, distinguishes it from the neighboring notions of ideology and historical analogy, and argues that the raw material later actors exploit was already rendered malleable in antiquity. It supplies the analytical vocabulary on which the case studies draw.

Chapter 2 turns to Machiavelli and the expansionist republic. Reading the *Discourses on Livy* against early sixteenth-century Italy, it shows how Rome was recovered as a living model in which internal liberty and external conquest reinforce one another.¹⁰ It inaugurates the modern political uses of Rome and establishes the republican strand that later actors would prolong or repudiate.

Chapter 3 examines Gibbon and the invention of imperial decline, analysing how the *Decline and Fall* converted Rome into a theory of the life cycle of empires, and how that theory was transmitted to debates about British and American power. The declensionist narrative it reconstructs becomes one of the master frames of the whole tradition, indispensable for the contemporary debates treated at the close.

Chapter 4 considers Napoleon between republic and empire, tracing the dialectic of appropriation and distancing through which a novel imperial sovereignty (at once modern and ancient) was fashioned from Roman materials and propagated through inscription, monument, and ritual.¹¹ It stages, more sharply than any other case, the oscillation between the republican and imperial Romes.

¹⁰ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); for the imperial dimension of his republicanism, see Mikael Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹¹ On the Napoleonic uses of the Roman past, see Catharine Edwards, “Napoleon I: A New Augustus?” in *Roman Presences*, ed. Edwards, 51–69, and Federico Santangelo, “*Napoleon and Ancient Rome: The Models of the Republic and the Empire, 1779–1815*,” *FuturoClassico* 8 (2022).

Chapter 5 studies Rome and the British Empire in India (c. 1780–1914), examining how classical scholarship and the prestige of the Roman precedent were mobilized to legitimize rule over culturally distant peoples, and how imperial experience reshaped classical scholarship in turn.¹² It exhibits the myth in its liberal-imperial register, where the reframing of hierarchy as order does its most sustained work.

Chapter 6 analyses Fascism and Nazism, treating Rome as a *total* political myth, which is to be lived rather than cited, and shows how the Italian cult of *romanità* and the racialized German appropriation of antiquity drew incompatible lessons from the same imperial history.¹³ This is the limiting case of the tradition, in which the sanctification of foundational violence is pursued to its catastrophic extreme.

Chapter 7 returns the inquiry to the present, examining the United States and Rome through the works of Murphy, Ferguson, and James, set within a wider field that includes Kennedy, Johnson, Bacevich, Heather and Rapley, and Watts.¹⁴ It shows how an analogy that once served as a republican warning against monarchy mutated into an argument about imperial overreach and decline: the Roman mirror still in use, its operations intact even as its mood shifts from celebration to foreboding.

Read together, these seven chapters substantiate the thesis's central claim: that across five centuries and a wide range of regimes, the Roman Empire has served as a contested field of political meaning: a mirror in which successive actors

¹² Phiroze Vasunia, "Greater Rome and Greater Britain," in *Classics and Colonialism*, ed. Barbara Goff (London: Duckworth, 2005), 38–64; and Richard Hingley, *Roman Officers and English Gentlemen: The Imperial Origins of Roman Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 2000).

¹³ On the political religions of the interwar period and their classical apparatus, see Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, trans. Keith Botsford (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), and Johann Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans: How the Nazis Usurped Europe's Classical Past*, trans. Richard R. Nybakken (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome?* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2008); Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004); Harold James, *The Roman Predicament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House, 1987); and Peter Heather and John Rapley, *Why Empires Fall: Rome, America, and the Future of the West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023).

have read the legitimacy of their own power and the fate of the orders they sought to build, defend, or mourn.

Chapter 1: Rome as Political Myth and Imperial Argument

1.1 The Recurrence Problem

A state that ceased to exist in the western Mediterranean fifteen centuries ago, and in the eastern Mediterranean more than five, has never stopped being argued about. It is invoked in the council chambers of Renaissance Florence and in the pamphlet wars of the Atlantic revolutions; it is carved into the triumphal architecture of Napoleonic Paris and the colonial gazetteers of British India; it supplies the iconography of interwar Fascism and the analytical vocabulary of twenty-first-century debates about American power. The puzzle that animates this thesis is not what the Roman Empire was, but why it will not stay in the past, why so many regimes facing such different problems have reached, almost reflexively, for the same ancient referent.¹⁵

The answer this chapter proposes is that “Rome” functions in modern political as a political myth: a charged narrative about the past that supplies actors with ready-made categories of legitimate authority, natural hierarchy, and justified force, categories that can be deployed without having to be argued from first principles each time. The thesis title names the governing image, the imperial mirror, and the metaphor is exact. Those who look to Rome tend, as Cullen Murphy observes in the work that anchors the final chapter, to find their own features reflected back at them; Rome becomes “the eagle in the mirror,” an image of the self-magnified and ennobled by antiquity.¹⁶ The reflection is never neutral. To compare one’s own polity to Rome is already to make a claim about what that polity is and what it is entitled to do.

This chapter proceeds in four steps. It first theorizes the category of political myth and distinguishes it from neighboring concepts. It then argues, against any view that treats antiquity as inert raw material awaiting modern

¹⁵Catharine Edwards, ed., *Roman Presences: Receptions of Rome in European Culture, 1789–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1–18.

¹⁶Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 14–15; the point recurs, and is examined at length, in Chapter 7 below.

interpretation, that the malleability later actors exploit was already manufactured in antiquity by Roman and Greek writers who fashioned competing, often contradictory versions of what Rome meant. It shows how these ancient “kits” perform three recurrent legitimating operations, naturalizing expansion, reframing hierarchy as order, and sanctifying foundational violence, and how each such operation is enlisted on behalf of some larger vision of international order.

1.2 Theorizing Political Myth

The word myth is treacherous in political analysis because ordinary usage equates it with falsehood. That equation must be set aside at the outset. The analytically useful sense of political myth is not “a story that is untrue” but, following a now substantial body of theory, a narrative that performs work for a community regardless of its correspondence to the historical record. Its truth-value is not the interesting question; its function is. A political myth can be largely accurate, wholly invented, or, as in the Roman case, a selective amplification of real events, and still operate in exactly the same way, by furnishing a shared symbolic frame through which power is recognized as legitimate.

Three distinctions sharpen the concept. First, political myth is not the same as ideology. Ideology in the strict sense aspires to systematic doctrine, a connected set of propositions about society; myth works through narrative and image, and tolerates incoherence. One can hold mutually contradictory Roman myths at once, the austere republic and the glittering empire, without strain, precisely because myth resonates rather than argues. Second, political myth is not the same as historical analogy. An analogy is an explicit argument from similarity that can be tested and refuted (“America resembles Rome in respects x and y, therefore z”); myth need not argue at all, and frequently does its most important work below the threshold of explicit comparison, as atmosphere, as a structure of feeling, as the unexamined sense that one stands in a line of descent. Third, and most importantly, political myth is not reducible to error. To say that Mussolini’s *romanità* or Macaulay’s civilizing Rome was “mythical” is not to say it was a mistake the

actors would have corrected with better scholarship; it is to say that its persuasive force was independent of its scholarly adequacy.

The theoretical lineage here is well established. Roland Barthes supplies the crucial mechanism: myth operates by transforming history into nature, by making what is contingent and made by human beings appear given, timeless, and beyond dispute.¹⁷ This is the single most important property for the present study, because every imperial argument examined in the following chapters depends on converting a political choice, to conquer, to dominate, to rank peoples in a hierarchy, into something that merely follows from the nature of things. Ernst Cassirer, writing in the shadow of the Second World War, emphasized the deliberate, even technical, manufacture of political myth by modern states, its character as something engineered rather than inherited.¹⁸ Georges Sorel had earlier identified the converse property, the capacity of a mobilizing myth to organize collective action by presenting it as a single, undivided image.¹⁹ More recent theorists give the concept analytical precision: Christopher Flood defines political myth as an ideologically marked narrative that purports to give a true account of past or predicted events and is held to be valid by a social group,²⁰ while Chiara Bottici, building on Hans Blumenberg, reframes myth not as a fixed text but as an ongoing process, a continual “work on myth” in which each generation reworks an inherited narrative to make sense of its own condition.²¹

Bottici’s emphasis on process is decisive for what follows, because it dissolves a false choice. One need not decide whether the “real” Rome lies in antiquity or in its modern uses; the myth simply is the cumulative sequence of its reworkings. Raoul Girardet’s typology of recurrent political myths, the conspiracy,

¹⁷Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972 [1957]), 142–143, on myth as a system that converts the contingent and historical into the self-evident and natural.

¹⁸Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), esp. 277–296.

¹⁹Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 [1908]), 28–30, on the mobilizing power of the myth as an undivided image of action.

²⁰Christopher Flood, *Political Myth: A Theoretical Introduction* (New York: Garland, 1996), 41–44.

²¹Chiara Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 14–16 and 178–200, developing Hans Blumenberg’s notion of the continual “work on myth.”

the savior, the golden age, the unity of the body politic,²² maps with striking neatness onto the Roman material, which offers a golden age (the republic, or the Augustan peace), a savior (the restorer of order after civil strife), and a recurrent drama of decline and corruption. To this one must add the constructivist insight associated with Hobsbawm and Ranger, that traditions presenting themselves as immemorial are frequently of recent and deliberate manufacture,²³ and Pierre Nora's notion of the *lieu de mémoire*, the site of memory in which a community deposits its sense of continuity with the past.²⁴ Rome is perhaps the supreme European *lieu de mémoire*: a reservoir of symbolic capital on which the most diverse projects can draw.

This functional approach carries a direct methodological consequence for the thesis, and it is worth making explicit so as to forestall a predictable objection. A reader might protest that several of the Roman claims examined below are simply false: that Rome was not in fact a model of balanced liberty, that the *pax romana* was conquest under a softer name, that the civilizing mission civilized very little. The objection is correct and beside the point. The thesis does not adjudicate whether the Roman myth is historically warranted; it asks how the myth works and what it accomplishes for those who wield it. When a Victorian administrator invokes Rome to justify the schooling of a subject population, the analytically interesting fact is not that his Rome is a scholarly caricature but that the caricature persuades, that it makes a policy of cultural domination feel like an act of benevolence sanctioned by history. To insist on correcting the historical record at every turn would be to mistake the object of study, for here the caricature is the object of study. This is precisely why the category of political myth, rather than that of historical error, governs the analysis throughout. To study Rome in this way is to treat it as what Van Wyck Brooks called a "usable past," a reservoir

²²Raoul Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 13–26.

²³Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1–14.

²⁴Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–24.

of historical reference selectively reconstructed to answer the needs of the present rather than recovered for its own sake; the chapters that follow ask, of each actor in turn, what use the Roman past was made to serve.²⁵

From these elements a working definition can be assembled, and it will be used consistently throughout the thesis. A political myth is a symbolically charged narrative about the past that supplies a community with usable categories of legitimacy, naturalizing authority, hierarchy and the use of force, whose efficacy depends on resonance rather than on demonstrated historical accuracy, and which is continually reworked to address the political needs of the present. The remainder of this chapter asks where the Roman version of such a narrative comes from, and the answer is more surprising than the constructivist tradition sometimes implies: a decisive part of the work was done by the Romans themselves.

1.3 The Ancient Manufacture of the Myth

There is a temptation, especially strong in reception studies, to treat antiquity as a quarry, an inert deposit of material that later ages cut and shape according to their own designs. On this view the interesting agency lies entirely with the moderns: Machiavelli, Gibbon, Mussolini, and the rest impose meaning on a passive Rome. This chapter resists that picture, for two reasons. The first is interpretive accuracy: the Roman past that later empires invoked was an already-curated, already-contested construction, assembled by writers who were themselves senators, exiles, client-poets and provincial governors with urgent stakes in how Rome understood itself.²⁶ The second reason is structural, and it strengthens the thesis as a whole. If the ancient sources spoke with one voice, the astonishing versatility of Rome's modern uses would be hard to explain; one would have to credit each later

²⁵The phrase is Van Wyck Brooks's: "On Creating a Usable Past," *The Dial* 64 (1918): 337–341; for the concept's subsequent currency in the study of memory and reception, see Henry Steele Commager, *The Search for a Usable Past, and Other Essays in Historiography* (New York: Knopf, 1967), 3–27. The notion is the historiographical counterpart of the functional theory of myth set out above: in both, the past is valued for its present uses rather than for its accuracy.

²⁶Alain M. Gowing, *Empire and Memory: The Representation of the Roman Republic in Imperial Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1–16.

actor with enormous interpretive violence. But the sources do not speak with one voice. They bequeathed a set of distinct, mutually competing strands, what may be called the kits of the Roman myth, each forged for immediate domestic political purposes and each subsequently available to be selected, combined, and turned to ends its authors never imagined. The plasticity exploited from Machiavelli to the Pentagon was, in this precise sense, manufactured in antiquity.

It is worth stressing why the kits compete. Most of them were produced in or around the long crisis that destroyed the republic and installed the principate, the civil wars of the first century BC and the Augustan settlement that followed. That trauma generated diametrically opposed lessons: that Rome's greatness lay in its free republican institutions; that those institutions had bred the ambition that destroyed them; that one-man rule was a catastrophe; that one-man rule was a salvation. The Roman tradition is contradictory because Roman writers were arguing, in real time, about the meaning of the most consequential constitutional rupture of the ancient world. Later actors inherit not a settled verdict but the argument itself.

1.3.1 The exemplary kit: Livy and the moral past

The first and most influential strand is the exemplary history of Livy (59 BC – AD 17), whose vast *Ab Urbe Condita* was composed across the Augustan decades. Livy states his purpose with unusual frankness in his preface: history's special value is that it sets before the reader, as on a conspicuous monument, models of conduct to imitate and to avoid.²⁷ His Rome is built from exempla, crystallized moral episodes, each illustrating a civic virtue. Lucretia's suicide founds the republic on outraged chastity and the hatred of tyranny; Horatius Cocles holds the bridge alone; Cincinnatus leaves the plough for the dictatorship and returns to it; Mucius Scaevola burns his own hand to prove Roman resolve. These are civic catechism, designed to transmit the *mos maiorum*, the way of the ancestors, to a

²⁷Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, Praefatio 10; see Jane D. Chaplin, *Livy's Exemplary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1–10.

generation that had just survived the self-destruction of the republic.²⁸ Livy writes, that is, in a register of nostalgic moral instruction, holding up an idealized early Rome as reproach and remedy to a present he regards as corrupted by success.²⁹

The exemplary kit is the most portable of all, precisely because exempla are modular: a single episode can be lifted intact and pressed into a new argument. It is no accident that the founding text of modern republican thought, Machiavelli's *Discourses*, takes the form of a commentary on Livy, nor that the revolutionary and Napoleonic generations learned their politics from the heroes of the Roman past in the schoolroom, nor that Victorian administrators reached for Livian and Ciceronian models when justifying the education of a subject population. Each of these later uses, examined in Chapters 2, 4 and 5, is in effect a selection from Livy's gallery of exempla, redeployed for a purpose Livy did not foresee.

1.3.2 Exemplary biography: Plutarch and the portable life

Closely allied to the Livian kit, and in the long run perhaps its most effective vehicle, is the biographical tradition that found its consummate expression in Plutarch (c. AD 46 – after 119). A Greek writing under Roman rule, Plutarch composed his *Parallel Lives* by pairing eminent Greeks with eminent Romans, and his avowed aim was moral rather than antiquarian: he sought, as he announced, not to write histories but to display character, the small gesture or telling phrase that reveals a soul, so that the reader might emulate virtue and shun vice.³⁰ His lives of Romulus, the Gracchi, Cato the Younger, Caesar, Brutus and Antony distilled the Roman past into a gallery of imitable and cautionary individuals, creating the single most portable form the Roman myth would ever take: the exemplary life, detachable from its context and ready to be held up as a pattern. Translated by

²⁸Andrew Feldherr, *Spectacle and Society in Livy's History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1–19.

²⁹Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 459–475, on the literature of the Augustan settlement.

³⁰Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 1, where he distinguishes the writing of lives from the writing of histories; see Timothy E. Duff, *Plutarch's Lives: Exploring Virtue and Vice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 13–51. On the formative role of the *Lives* in the schooling of the revolutionary and Napoleonic generations, see Chapter 4 below.

Amyot and North in the sixteenth century, the Lives became a school text across early-modern Europe, and it is scarcely an exaggeration that the revolutionary and Napoleonic imagination was Plutarchan before it was anything else. The young Bonaparte who immersed himself at Brienne in the lives of antiquity's heroes, and who would later be called a man of Plutarch, is the subject of Chapter 4; the same exemplars, Cato, Brutus and the Gracchi, furnished the moral theatre of the French and American revolutions alike, supplying roles one could choose to inhabit. The exemplary kit, in short, reached modernity less through Livy read in the original than through Plutarch read in translation.

1.3.3 The decline kit: Sallust and the corruption of success

Against Livy's constructive nostalgia stands a darker and, for this thesis, even more consequential strand: the theory of decline through success articulated by Sallust (86 – c. 35 BC) and elaborated in the later books of Livy himself. Sallust, a disgraced ex-praetor writing in bitter retirement, advanced a specific and durable causal thesis. So long as Rome faced the existential threat of Carthage, the fear of a rival, *metus hostilis*, imposed discipline, concord and martial virtue. With Carthage destroyed in 146 BC, the external check vanished, and prosperity unleashed avarice and ambition, which corroded the republic from within.³¹ Success, on this account, is not the reward of virtue but its solvent; the very victories that make an empire great set in motion the moral decay that will undo it.³²

This is the single most reusable piece of Roman material in the entire history of imperial argument, and the thesis returns to it repeatedly. It is the deep structure of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, which transposes the Sallustian diagnosis from the republic to the empire and, in doing so, manufactures the portable template of imperial decay that Chapter 3 analyses. It is then applied recursively

³¹Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae* 10; on the *metus hostilis* thesis see D. C. Earl, *The Political Thought of Sallust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 41–59.

³²Daniel J. Kapust, *Republicanism, Rhetoric, and Roman Political Thought: Sallust, Livy, and Tacitus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 30–51.

to Rome's modern claimants: the American declinists of Chapter 7, from Paul Kennedy's theory of imperial overstretch to the jeremiads of the post-2001 decade, are, knowingly or not, Sallust's heirs, reading present prosperity as the symptom of impending ruin. Edward Watts has shown that this lament is not the record of any single fall but a rhetorical genre more than two thousand years old, deployed most stridently, and this is the crucial irony, at the very height of Roman power; the Romans were the first and most accomplished mourners of Rome.³³ It is unusual among the strands, too, in that it can be turned against empire as easily as it can be made to discipline one, which is precisely why it has proved so enduring, serving the imperial moralist who would reform his countrymen and the critic who would prophesy their fall with equal facility.

1.3.4 The constitutional kit: Polybius and the mixed regime

A third strand comes not from a Roman at all but from a Greek observer, Polybius (c. 200 – c. 118 BC), brought to Rome as a political hostage and writing to explain to his fellow Greeks how a single city had subjected the Mediterranean world in barely half a century. His answer, set out in the sixth book of his *Histories*, was constitutional. Simple regimes, monarchy, aristocracy, democracy, are inherently unstable and degenerate in a predictable cycle (anacyclosis) into their corrupt counterparts. Rome had escaped the cycle by combining all three principles, the consuls supplying the monarchic element, the senate the aristocratic, the popular assemblies the democratic, in a balance in which each checked the others.³⁴ The mechanism mattered as much as the result: because each element required the cooperation of the others in order to act, no single part could aggrandize itself without provoking the resistance of the rest, and so the constitution achieved stability harnessing conflict. Rome succeeded, in short, because it was well designed.

³³Edward J. Watts, *The Eternal Decline and Fall of Rome: The History of a Dangerous Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 1–10; the inheritance of this template by Gibbon and by the contemporary American debate is treated in Chapters 3 and 7 below.

³⁴Polybius, *Histories* 6.3–6.18; F. W. Walbank, *Polybius* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 130–156.

The constitutional kit converts Roman power from a moral phenomenon into an institutional one, and in doing so founds a tradition of immense consequence. It supplies the vocabulary of the mixed and balanced constitution that Cicero would adopt, that Machiavelli would radicalize into his account of the productive conflict between patricians and plebeians, and that the American framers would consciously imitate in their separation of powers and their scheme of checks and balances, designing a senate and an executive in deliberate emulation of a constitution they knew through Polybius and Cicero as much as through any modern source.³⁵ When Chapter 2 examines Machiavelli's claim that Rome's liberty grew out of its very tumults, the Polybian kit is the ancestor in view.

1.3.5 The providential kit: Virgil and the destined empire

The fourth strand is the most exalted, and it performs the legitimating work of the myth in its purest form. In the *Aeneid*, composed under Augustan patronage, Virgil (70 – 19 BC) gave Rome a foundation epic that bound the new regime to the prestige of Homer while transfiguring conquest into cosmic destiny. Jupiter promises the Romans dominion without limit of space or time, *imperium sine fine*.³⁶ In the underworld, Anchises instructs the future Roman to remember that his distinctive art is to rule the nations under law, to spare the conquered and to crush the proud, *parcere subiectis et debellare superbos*.³⁷ Here expansion is not chosen but ordained; empire is not the outcome of a recent and bloody civil war but the fulfilment of a divine plan laid down before the founding. This is precisely the operation Barthes describes, history converted into nature, performed at the highest pitch.

³⁵Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 1–11; for the republican lineage that carries the Polybian constitution into modernity, see Chapter 2 below.

³⁶Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.278–279 (“*imperium sine fine dedi*”); on the cosmic framing of Roman power, Philip Hardie, *Virgil's Aeneid: Cosmos and Imperium* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 364–366.

³⁷Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.851–853.

The providential kit is the engine of the most ambitious imperial claims studied in this thesis, from the Napoleonic re-founding of Rome as the empire's "second city" (Chapter 4), through the British conviction of a civilizing mission carrying law and order to subject peoples (Chapter 5), to the Fascist insistence that conquest merely recovered a destiny temporarily mislaid (Chapter 6). Yet the kit is not univocal even in Virgil's hands. A long line of scholarship has detected "further voices" in the poem, the pathos of the abandoned Dido, the troubling killing of Turnus in its final lines, an undertow of grief at the human cost of empire that coexists with the celebratory surface.³⁸ The providential kit thus contains, from the start, the seeds of its own questioning, a fact that matters when later actors find in Rome both the warrant for empire and the materials for its critique.

1.3.6 Self-fashioning: the Res Gestae and the Augustan program

If Virgil mythologized the regime in epic, Augustus mythologized himself in the first person. The *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, the record of his achievements inscribed for public display across the empire, is the ancient world's most direct act of imperial self-fashioning, a ruler composing his own foundation narrative in real time and presenting the seizure of supreme power as the restoration of the republic.

³⁹ It belongs with the larger Augustan program in which architecture, coinage, ritual and poetry were coordinated into a single image of renewal, peace and piety.

⁴⁰ The *Res Gestae* establishes a template of self-mythologizing rule that the thesis encounters again and again, most explicitly in Napoleon's bronze-and-stone self-presentation and in Mussolini's forty-four volumes of speeches, both of which are studied below as conscious re-enactments of the Augustan gesture.

³⁸R. O. A. M. Lyne, *Further Voices in Vergil's Aeneid* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); and W. R. Johnson, *Darkness Visible: A Study of Vergil's Aeneid* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

³⁹Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, ed. and trans. Alison E. Cooley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), with commentary at 1–30.

⁴⁰Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988); Karl Galinsky, *Augustan Culture: An Interpretive Introduction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

1.3.7 The myth in stone and bronze: monuments, triumph, coinage

Not all of the kits were textual, and any account that confined itself to literature would miss the channel through which the Roman myth most often reached the illiterate and the casual observer. Rome bequeathed an entire visual and ceremonial vocabulary of power: the triumphal arch, the honorific column, the equestrian statue, the eagle standard, the laurel wreath and the fasces, and above all the ritual of the triumph itself, in which a victorious general processed through the city in the dress and almost the person of Jupiter.⁴¹ The Augustan program welded this material language to the providential myth, so that the Altar of Peace, the Forum of Augustus lined with the statues of Rome's great men, and the coinage that carried the emperor's image and slogans to the furthest provinces all told the same story of restored peace and destined greatness.⁴²

The crucial feature of this kit for the present study is its directness and its transferability. A triumphal arch makes its imperial claim without a word of argument, and it can be re-erected anywhere; an eagle or fasces can be adopted by a regime that has read none of the texts those symbols once accompanied. The thesis will repeatedly encounter rulers who reached first, or most insistently, for the Roman myth in its built and enacted form rather than its written one. The triumphal arches and the Vendôme column of Napoleonic Paris, examined in Chapter 4, the neoclassical monumentality of imperial Britain and its capital, and the fasci, eagles, she-wolves and choreographed processions that saturated Fascist Italy, treated in Chapter 6, are all selections from this visual kit, which carried the legitimating force of Rome to vast audiences who had never opened Livy.

⁴¹Mary Beard, *The Roman Triumph* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1–41.

⁴²Diane Favro, *The Urban Image of Augustan Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). The afterlife of this visual repertoire in Napoleonic Paris and in Fascist Italy is examined in Chapters 4 and 6 below.

1.3.8 The libertas kit: Cicero and the language of free government

A further strand supplies the vocabulary of liberty, and it derives chiefly from Cicero (106 – 43 BC). In his philosophical works Cicero adapted the Polybian mixed constitution to Roman conditions and grounded politics in a natural law antecedent to any particular regime; in his speeches and letters he fashioned himself as the defender of the republic and the senatorial order against the threat of one-man rule, first Caesar's, then Antony's.⁴³ The Catilinarian orations present their author as the savior of the state; the Philippics cast him as the last voice of libertas against tyranny, a role sealed by his proscription and death.⁴⁴

The libertas kit furnishes the conceptual idiom in which the loss of self-government can be named as the true cost of empire, regardless of the material prosperity empire brings. It is the strand on which the republican phase of the French Revolution drew when it reviled Caesar as the archetype of the despot (Chapter 4), and which the American revolutionaries adopted when they signed their polemics “Publius” and “Cato.” Its presence in the thesis is a standing reminder that the Roman myth was never simply a charter for domination; it also bequeathed the most powerful ancient language for resisting it.

1.3.9 The counter-myth: Tacitus and the critique from within

Closely related, but more corrosive, is the strand that demonstrates the tradition contained its own internal critics. Tacitus (c. AD 56 – c. 120), writing under the principate about the generations that had lost their freedom to it, produced in the *Annals* and *Histories* a portrait of imperial rule as the extinction of liberty beneath the preserved forms of the old constitution.⁴⁵ His most quoted device is to place an indictment of Roman imperialism in the mouth of its victims: the Caledonian chieftain Calgacus, on the eve of battle, observes that the Romans make a

⁴³Cicero, *De re publica* 1.45 and 1.69; *De legibus* 1.18–19; see Elizabeth Rawson, *Cicero: A Portrait* (London: Allen Lane, 1975), 146–158.

⁴⁴On the construction of Cicero's public persona, Catherine Steel, *Cicero, Rhetoric, and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 49–74.

⁴⁵Tacitus, *Agricola* 30 (“ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant”), the speech attributed to the Caledonian leader Calgacus.

desolation and call it peace.⁴⁶ That a Roman senator should compose, and expect his readers to feel the force of, so devastating an anti-imperial speech is the clearest proof that the providential and the critical strands coexisted within the tradition itself.

The afterlife of this kit is a study in ambivalence. The early-modern vogue for Tacitus, the “Tacitism” of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, read him simultaneously as a republican’s handbook against tyranny and as a manual of statecraft for princes, a reason of state.⁴⁷ Tacitus thus enters the thesis twice over: as the prose model and the moral source for Gibbon’s ironic narration of decline in Chapter 3, and as the ancestor of every later critic who, like Calgacus, exposes the violence beneath the rhetoric of order. The Roman myth, in other words, supplies not only the imperial argument but the script for its own refutation.

1.3.10 Origins and their discontents: the foundation narratives

Beneath all the strands lies the question of origins, and here too antiquity supplied not one story but a contested cluster. Rome possessed two competing foundation myths, never fully reconciled: the Trojan descent through Aeneas, which Virgil raised to canonical status, and the native tale of Romulus and Remus, the twins suckled by the she-wolf, one of whom murdered the other in the very act of founding the city.⁴⁸ Livy opens his history with these stories and is candid about their unreliability, offering them as what the Romans chose to believe about themselves rather than as ascertained fact; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a Greek writing for a Greek readership, elaborated them at length precisely in order to argue that Rome was, in its origins, essentially a Greek city.⁴⁹

What is striking, and what matters for the legitimating operations analyzed in the next section, is that the Roman foundation was understood from the outset to be founded in violence, fratricide, the seizure of the Sabine women, war in

⁴⁶Tacitus, *Annals* 1.1–4; Ronald Syme, *Tacitus*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 1:217–255.

⁴⁷Peter Burke, “Tacitism,” in *Tacitus*, ed. T. A. Dorey (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 149–171.

⁴⁸T. P. Wiseman, *Remus: A Roman Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁴⁹Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita* 1.4–1.7; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 1.72–1.85, who argues for the essentially Greek character of Rome’s origins.

Latium, and that the tradition did not flinch from this so much as consecrate it, treating the originating crime as the necessary and even sacred price of greatness. The competing versions left later actors a choice of pedigrees, Trojan or Italic, civilized inheritor or autochthonous conqueror, and the management of foundational violence, whether to acknowledge it, to displace it into a superseded past, or to glory in it, would become one of the most revealing things an imperial argument could do. The foundation narratives are thus less a single kit than the contested ground on which all the others rest.

1.3.11 The agrarian and the martyr: the two Catos

A final strand is associated with the figure, and figures, of Cato. Cato the Elder (234 – 149 BC), in the earliest surviving work of Latin prose, the *De agri cultura*, articulated the agrarian ideal that made rustic discipline and self-sufficiency the bedrock of Roman virtue and treated Greek luxury and sophistication with suspicion.⁵⁰ Cato the Younger (95 – 46 BC) became, chiefly through the accounts of others and above all through Plutarch, the very emblem of incorruptible republican virtue, his suicide at Utica rather than submission to Caesar transforming him into the Stoic martyr of liberty.⁵¹ The two Catos supply complementary materials: an ideal of austere, self-denying citizenship and a model of principled resistance unto death. Both were eagerly seized by the revolutionary generation, French and American alike; the austere Cato of the farm and the martyred Cato of Utica together furnished the moral wardrobe of republican virtue.

The cumulative point of this section is not antiquarian. It is that these strands, exemplary virtue and the exemplary life, decline through success, the mixed constitution, providential destiny, imperial self-fashioning in word and image, the language of liberty, the critique from within, and the contested narratives of origin, were already in competition with one another by the time Augustus died. Later users of the Roman myth are therefore not choosing between

⁵⁰Cato, *De agri cultura*, praef.; Alan E. Astin, *Cato the Censor* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 157–181.

⁵¹Robert J. Goar, *The Legend of Cato Uticensis from the First Century B.C. to the Fifth Century A.D.* (Brussels: Latomus, 1987).

an “accurate” and a “mythologized” Rome. They are choosing among rival mythologizations that Roman and Greek authors had themselves constructed, for reasons of immediate domestic politics that had nothing to do with the empires that would one day borrow their work. The chapters that follow can thus be read as a series of selections from, and recombinations of, this ancient repertoire.

The mechanism by which these competing kits remained continuously available deserves a word, since it explains why the actors in the following chapters could reach for Rome with so little effort or self-consciousness. Two channels carried the material across the centuries. The first was institutional and political: the medieval and early-modern doctrine of the *translatio imperii*, which treated Roman authority as a heritable office passed to the Carolingian and then the Holy Roman emperors, kept alive the fiction of a single, continuous Rome that its successors could claim as their own.⁵² The second, and for the modern period the more important, was educational. The classical curriculum that defined elite formation across early-modern and modern Europe ensured that successive governing classes read Livy, Cicero, Virgil, Sallust and Tacitus in the original, and Plutarch in translation, internalizing not merely the Latin language but the categories, exempla and warnings those texts contained.⁵³ By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries an educated European could scarcely think about contemporary politics except through classical analogy, because the classics furnished the very vocabulary in which political thought was conducted. The kits, in short, were not retrieved from an archive on each occasion; they were the furniture of the educated mind, ready to hand whenever a present crisis seemed to summon an ancient precedent.

⁵²Werner Goetz, *Translatio Imperii: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Geschichtsdenkens und der politischen Theorien im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1958).

⁵³Françoise Waquet, *Latin, or the Empire of a Sign: From the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 2001); and Christopher Stray, *Classics Transformed: Schools, Universities, and Society in England, 1830–1960* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

1.4 From Kits to Legitimation: Three Operations and the Order of the World

The chapter's governing claim, announced at the outset, can now be made precise. Rome's symbolic authority allows empires to present expansion as natural, hierarchy as order, and violence as foundational rather than arbitrary. Each of these three operations is performed by identifiable strands of the ancient material catalogued above, and tracing the operation back to its kit is what gives the thesis its analytic grip. Each operation, moreover, is enlisted on behalf of some larger vision of how power among peoples ought to be arranged, and the relationship between Roman imagery and these competing visions of international order is the thread the remaining chapters follow.

1.4.1 Naturalizing expansion

The naturalization of expansion is chiefly the work of the providential kit. When Jupiter grants empire without end and Anchises defines the Roman vocation as ruling the nations, conquest ceases to appear as a decision for which anyone is answerable and comes to seem the unfolding of a destiny written into the order of things. This is the Barthesian conversion of history into nature in its imperial form, and it recurs wherever an expanding power wishes its expansion to look inevitable rather than chosen.

In the Napoleonic claim to be completing a continental order, in the British conviction that the diffusion of civilization followed a developmental law as reliable as any in nature, and in the Fascist insistence that the Mediterranean was Italy's by a destiny merely interrupted, the same grammar is at work, and the analyst's task is to catch the precise point at which the verb of choosing is exchanged for the verb of being. That so many ideologies of empire have found this move indispensable, as Anthony Pagden has shown across the Spanish, British and French cases, is testimony to the peculiar usefulness of a Roman precedent that had already performed it, and performed it with the unmatched authority of

Virgil's verse.⁵⁴ The empire, on this telling, merely occupies the space that destiny had always marked out for it, and resistance becomes not a political claim but an offence against the nature of things.

1.4.2 Reframing hierarchy as order

The reframing of hierarchy as order draws on the providential and constitutional kits together. The Virgilian formula, to spare the conquered and crush the proud, already encodes a hierarchy of peoples, the ruling and the ruled, and presents that hierarchy as the gift of law and peace; the Polybian celebration of Rome's ordered constitution lends the arrangement an air of rational design. The genius of the Roman formula is that it does not deny the hierarchy but ennoble it: the conquered are not merely subjugated but improved, raised by their rulers toward a civilization they could not have reached alone, so that domination presents itself as pedagogy and tribute as the wages of order.

This is the operation at the heart of the British civilizing mission examined in Chapter 5, where, as Phiroze Vasunia and Richard Hingley have shown, the Victorian idea of "Romanization", Britain's own transformation by its Roman conquerors, was projected forward onto India as the template for a benevolent and improving rule, with the crucial and self-serving refinement that the improvement was imagined as a process that would one day end.⁵⁵ What the Roman precedent licensed, in David Armitage's account of the ideological origins of the British empire, was precisely the redescription of conquest as the gift of law, liberty and commerce, an empire that could understand itself as the bringer of order rather than the taker of land.⁵⁶ The same operation reappears, stripped of its liberal

⁵⁴Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c.1500–c.1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 11–28.

⁵⁵Phiroze Vasunia, "Greater Rome and Greater Britain," in *Classics and Colonialism*, ed. Barbara Goff (London: Duckworth, 2005), 38–64; Richard Hingley, *Roman Officers and English Gentlemen: The Imperial Origins of Roman Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 2000). Both are treated in Chapter 5 below.

⁵⁶David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–23.

vocabulary and radicalized into biology, in the Fascist hierarchy of Latins and “barbarians” examined in Chapter 6.

1.4.3 Sanctifying foundational violence

The sanctification of foundational violence draws on the exemplary kit, on the biographical tradition, and on the foundation narratives discussed above. Rome’s origins are drenched in blood, Romulus kills Remus, the new city seizes the Sabine women, Aeneas wins Italy by war, and yet the tradition consistently presents this originating violence as a sacred and generative act, the necessary price and proof of the city’s greatness. To found is to be permitted what is otherwise forbidden, and the Roman tradition supplies the classic statement of this terrible license: the founder who sheds blood to make a state is to be judged by the result, not the deed.

It is exactly this principle that Machiavelli will extract from the story of Romulus and make the cornerstone of his political science, arguing that a well-ordered republic may excuse its founder the violence of its founding, and that a city’s vitality springs from the very conflicts that a more squeamish politics would suppress.⁵⁷ Other actors manage the same inheritance more delicately. The British administrators acknowledge the initial conquest only in order to consign it to a superseded past, redeemed by subsequent benefit; the Fascist myth, by contrast, gloried in foundational violence as the proof of a virility it wished to reclaim. The range of these strategies, from open celebration through tactful displacement to outright denial, is itself one of the most diagnostic features an imperial argument presents, because how a regime handles the blood at its origin reveals how it wishes to be seen.

1.4.4 The operations and the competing visions of order

What these three operations share is that each takes a contingent and contestable exercise of power, expanding, ranking, killing, and supplies it with a Roman warrant that makes it appear necessary, orderly, or sacred, removing the act from

⁵⁷Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, I.9, on the founder excused by the result of his founding; the argument is examined in Chapter 2 below.

the sphere of choice, where it could be criticized, and relocating it in the sphere of nature, order, or destiny, where it cannot. But the operations are means, not ends, and the end they serve is always some particular conception of how the world of peoples and powers should be ordered. Here the contradictory richness of the ancient repertoire becomes decisive, for the same Roman material has been made to underwrite strikingly different visions of international order. It has served the ideal of a free republic whose internal liberty and external expansion reinforce one another, the vision that Machiavelli draws from Rome's tumults in Chapter 2. It has served the ideal of a graded, civilizational order in which a superior power rules and improves its inferiors, the vision of the British in India and, in its racialized extremity, of Fascist Italy, whose *romanità*, as Jan Nelis has emphasized, was an endlessly malleable construct precisely because the ancient materials it drew on were themselves so various.⁵⁸ It has served, inverted, as a counsel of prudence and restraint, a warning that overextension and luxury destroy even the greatest powers, the vision that Gibbon bequeaths to the American declinists of Chapters 3 and 7. And it has furnished, through its Tacitean and Ciceronian strands, the language in which empire is condemned outright as the death of freedom.

These operations also illuminate why the governing metaphor of this thesis is a mirror rather than, say, a model or a blueprint. A model is consulted for instruction; a mirror returns an image of the one who looks. When an actor performs the three operations, naturalizing his expansion, ordering his hierarchy, sanctifying his founding violence, he is not so much discovering in Rome an objective lesson as recognizing in Rome a flattering likeness of what he already wishes to do. The Roman material is sufficiently capacious, and sufficiently self-contradictory, that almost any project can find its reflection somewhere within it. This is the deeper sense of the reflexivity that the final chapter, following Murphy

⁵⁸Jan Nelis, "Constructing Fascist Identity: Benito Mussolini and the Myth of *Romanità*," *Classical World* 100, no. 4 (2007): 391–415; see Chapter 6 below.

and the Schweitzer image he invokes, makes explicit: the student of Rome tends to find in the ancient evidence the very concerns he brought to it.⁵⁹ The point is not that the comparison is therefore worthless, but that the analyst must read the modern user as carefully as the ancient source, asking not only what Rome was but what this particular viewer needed it to be. Each of the chapters that follow is, in this sense, as much a portrait of the viewer as of the mirror.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued for a particular way of understanding what it means to say that modern empires have “used Rome.” It has proposed that Rome functions as a political myth in the precise, non-pejorative sense: a symbolically charged narrative whose efficacy lies in resonance rather than accuracy, and whose persistent property is to convert the contingent exercise of power into something that appears natural, orderly, or sacred. It has argued, against the quarry model of reception, that the materials for these conversions were not inert. They were fashioned in antiquity by Roman and Greek writers into a set of competing kits, textual and visual alike, and the contradictions among those kits, the free republic against the corrupting empire, the providential mission against the Tacitean critique, the Trojan pedigree against the Italic, are the source of the myth’s extraordinary later versatility. And it has shown how these kits perform three recurrent legitimating operations, naturalizing expansion, ordering hierarchy, and sanctifying foundational violence, each enlisted on behalf of some larger vision of international order.

The wager of the thesis can now be stated plainly. It is that Rome is uniquely durable as an imperial mirror, more durable than any other historical empire, precisely because its source tradition is uniquely multi-vocal and uniquely well documented. An empire with a thinner or more univocal record offers fewer

⁵⁹Murphy, *Are We Rome?*, 16–22, invoking Albert Schweitzer's observation that scholars tend to find their own likeness in the ancient evidence; the reflexivity of the comparison is the organising theme of Chapter 7 below.

footholds; one cannot easily make Assyria or the Mongols argue both for and against empire, for expansion and for restraint, for hierarchy and for liberty. Rome can be made to do all of these things because Roman authors, arguing among themselves about the meaning of their own constitutional catastrophe, already did all of them. Every subsequent actor who looks into the Roman mirror is therefore selecting, from a repertoire prepared two thousand years ago, the reflection that serves the present, and the plasticity that the following chapters document is not a modern imposition upon Rome but the continuation of an argument that Rome began. The chapters that follow test this wager against six cases of escalating stakes.

Chapter 2: Machiavelli and the Expansionist Republic

Introduction

In the turbulent landscape of early sixteenth-century Italy, where republics rose and fell with alarming frequency and foreign armies carved the peninsula into spheres of influence, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) undertook a radical reconceptualization of republican politics. Writing from forced retirement after the Medici restoration of 1512, Machiavelli turned to the ancient world as a laboratory for understanding the fundamental dynamics of political survival. The result, his *Discourses on Livy*, presented Rome less as an object of antiquarian admiration than as a living model of what some authors called the “expansionist republic”: a political formation in which internal liberty and external conquest function as mutually reinforcing imperatives⁶⁰.

In Machiavelli’s eyes, the history of ancient Rome, by incorporating every possible political situation, provided a complete set of precedents for future republics and empires. By studying the rise and fall of the Roman republic, one could therefore gain a detailed understanding of the political development in all its stages, and by extrapolating from it, one could extract examples illustrating and embodying the principles of political prudence. The Romans, having no model to follow themselves, had learnt by their mistakes and shown great flexibility and imagination by inventing and reinventing their modes and orders as they went along⁶¹. In the process, they had, at least in the Machiavelli’s view, created a universal model for political action.

Machiavelli’s central insight, that republics survive through institutionalized conflict and through continuous military readiness, represented a decisive break from the humanist tradition that preceded him. Where earlier republican theorists emphasized civic virtue as moral excellence and sought

⁶⁰ Mullen, William. “Republics for expansion: the school of Rome.” *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 3.3 (1976): 298-364.

⁶¹ Discorsi ii.4,p.341: “non ce n’era innanzi a Roma esempio.”

stability through consensus, Machiavelli argued that Rome's greatness emerged precisely from its internal tumults and its relentless expansion.⁶² The social conflict between plebeians and patricians, far from threatening the republic, generated the institutional mechanisms that protected liberty. The conquest of neighboring territories secured the very independence upon which those values depended. In Machiavelli's hands, the republic became a dynamic engine of power, one that achieved domestic freedom through the mobilization of its citizens for external domination.

This argument has proven remarkably consequential. As J.G.A. Pocock demonstrated in his landmark study, Machiavelli's formulation crystallized a distinct moment in political consciousness: one in which republics came to be understood as temporal entities facing the problem of maintaining their existence through historical time.⁶³ This "Machiavellian moment" reverberated through subsequent centuries, shaping debates in England during the Civil War and Commonwealth period, informing the American founding, and continuing to frame discussions about popular sovereignty, armed citizenship, and the relationship between liberty and power. Yet this tradition has also generated sustained criticism, with scholars questioning its hierarchies, its militarism, its applicability to modern commercial societies, and its potential to legitimate domination in the name of freedom. Understanding Machiavelli's account of the expansionist republic, and the rich historiographical tradition it spawned, remains essential for grasping central tensions in modern political thought.

2.1 Rome as a Model: Context and Method

To understand Machiavelli's distinctive appropriation of Roman history, we must first appreciate the context in which he wrote. The *Discourses on the first decade of Titus Livius* and *The prince* were both fruit of a period of extreme political

⁶² Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024), I.4.

⁶³ J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 184.

instability in Italy and a personal professional crisis following the collapse of the Florentine Republic. By the early sixteen century, the Italian peninsula had become a battlefield for external powers, specifically the monarchies of France and Spain. The “line of demarcation” for this era of calamity was 1494, when the French (under Charls VIII) invaded, leading to decades of conflict that saw small Italian principalities overwhelmed by vast national armies. Rome and Florence were forced into submission, the vast French armies pillaged the countryside, and the Medici family (which established an informal but ruling oligarchy) were expelled leaving the place for popular form of government (Florentine Republic). However, this Florentine Republic, which Machiavelli had served as diplomat and secretary since 1498, didn’t last long. In 1512, the Medici family returned to power with the aid of Spanish troops, and Machiavelli suddenly found himself deprived of his office and livelihood⁶⁴. In Quentin Skinner’s quite critical stance⁶⁵, Machiavelli wrote “The Prince” at the end of 1513, primarily because he urgently needed to commend himself to the new Medici masters. He hoped, rather optimistically, that the work would prove his political expertise and help him win back political employment (as his letters to Vettori make clear⁶⁶). After the book failed its purpose and the hopes of gaining Medici favor proved misplaced, Machiavelli began to frequent the Oricellari Gardens, where a circle of Republican theorists and conspirators gathered. It was within this more skeptical intellectual circle that he began to work on the “Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy” around 1514. Unlike the Prince, which focused on the individual ruler, the Discourses were written to explore the preservation of “liberty” and the constitutional foundations of a successful Republic, using ancient Rome as a model. Eventually,

⁶⁴ In early 1513, he was accused of involvement in an anti-Medici conspiracy, imprisoned in the Bargello, and subjected to torture (strappado). From prison, he wrote two sonnets to Giuliano de' Medici, asking him to intercede. The first sonnet is a direct eyewitness account of his conditions and torture.

⁶⁵ Skinner, Quentin. *The foundations of modern political thought: Volume 1, the renaissance*. Cambridge University Press, 1978, 118-119; 153-154

⁶⁶ See Machiavelli, letters, pp. 101-107, 139-144.

both of the works were published posthumously (The discourses on Livy in 1531, and The Prince in 1532).

The immediate context, however, does not fully explain Machiavelli's turn to Rome or his particular reading of Roman history. Unlike many of his humanist predecessors, who mined classical sources for moral exemplars and rhetorical models, Machiavelli approached Roman history with a distinctly analytical eye. He sought practical knowledge about how republics actually function and survive. This methodological orientation, focused on what he famously called the "effectual truth" (*verità effettuale*) rather than imagined ideals, shaped his entire enterprise. Livy's history of Rome provided a repository of political experience, a collection of cases from which general principles could be extracted through careful analysis (In chapter 1 I will elaborate more extensively on Livy).

This approach led Machiavelli to focus on aspects of Roman history that others had glossed over or condemned. The conflicts between plebeians and patricians, which traditional accounts treated as unfortunate disorders that threatened civic harmony, became in Machiavelli's analysis the very source of Roman liberty and strength. The constant warfare that marked Roman expansion, which Christian and humanist writers had often lamented as a sign of moral corruption, appeared to Machiavelli as evidence of Rome's political vitality and the key to its longevity. By reading Roman history against the grain of conventional interpretation, Machiavelli uncovered a model of republican politics fundamentally different from the consensual, virtue-centered accounts that dominated contemporary political thought.

2.2 Machiavelli's Radical Turn

Machiavelli's intellectual development and political project need to be understood in relation to the general ideological climate and the changing attitudes to the ancient Romans in early Cinquecento Florence. Machiavelli's overt and covert use of the Roman model and his repeated adaptations to the changing ideological, political, and moral landscape of contemporary Florence go a long way to explain

his perplexing mixture of studied silences, insinuating remarks, and outspoken advice on subjects such as the connection between contemporary Florence and ancient Rome, and the republic's dual aim of liberty and empire. Machiavelli fitted his Roman example and his rhetorical strategies to suit the time, place, and circumstances and this (at least partially) explains some of the major interpretative difficulties surrounding his work, and most importantly, offered a plausible explanation for the much-debated difference between *The Prince* and the *Discourses*. Machiavelli's first elaborate use of the Roman expansionist model occurred in his memorandum on the Aretine question, "Del modo di trattare i popoli della Valdichiana ribellati", of 1503. This oration, in which the Secretary of the Second Chancery explicitly argues that Florence in dealing with the Aretine rebellion should imitate the Roman policy of the two extremes, rule by destruction and by benefits. The attempt (by praising the Roman imperial strategy of benefits and destruction and at the same time criticizing the Florentine "middle way") was to drive home the need for the pacification of the Aretine region, and to support the call to action⁶⁷. *Del modo* can be seen as a brave, but perhaps injudicious, attempt on the part of the Secretary of the Second Chancery to exhort his employers to take a firm stand on the Aretine issue and to reshape Florentine attitudes toward territorial rule in general. The failure of the oration's Roman inspired advice, it would seem, was due not only to it taking issue with the Florentine foreign policy doctrine of the middle way, but also to the fact that it conflicted with contemporary opinions on the ancient Romans.

To win acceptance for his own radical views, and to pave the way for a policy based on the Roman model in Florence, Machiavelli found it necessary to expose the ideological nature of this received wisdom, and to contest the ideological foundation of the Florentine republican tradition and the established Florentine foreign policy doctrine, based on notions such as the middle way, temporization, and neutrality. However, Machiavelli's proposal to imitate Roman

⁶⁷ Hörnqvist, Mikael. *Machiavelli and empire*. Vol. 71. Cambridge University Press, 2004, 103.

imperial strategy was not favorably received in the governing circles of Florence, and the leading citizen Piero Guicciardini, in a *pratica* of January 1506, dismissed the idea of using the two extremes against Arezzo, because he judged it to be a “Roman thing.”⁶⁸ As this *pratica* and other contemporary sources, as well as Machiavelli’s own retrospective comments in the Discourses and The Art of War, indicate, the ancient Romans had in early Cinquecento Florence, for ideological, moral, and religious reasons, come to be viewed with suspicion, if not outright hostility.

Machiavelli’s attack on the ideological conventions of Florentine political culture took added historical importance from the fact that the middle way (*via del mezzo*) was not only a central tenet of Florentine foreign policy, but also a key element in Aristotelian ethics. As is well known, Aristotle had defined virtue as a mean, or a middle way, between extremes. By turning Aristotle’s notion on its head and by redefining virtue as the ability to encompass and to make complementary use of the extremes, Machiavelli, inspired by the Roman imperial strategy, came to affect a minor revolution in the history of ethics. To repeat Roman success and to achieve republican liberty and imperial greatness, Machiavelli implies, the modern Florentines would have to break with the Aristotelian and the Christian definitions of virtue. For him, to be “good” or to be “virtuous” includes displaying the conventional virtues, but also being able to make calculated and dispassionate use of vice, or to “enter into evil,” as he puts it in *The Prince*.

2.3 The Two-Sided Strategy of Roman Imperialism

The ancient Romans displayed love of liberty, patriotism, and an admirable commitment to the civic culture of their city, but, as Machiavelli was quick to add, they also showed a great capacity for deceit and cruelty. These combined qualities, embodied by military commanders such as Manlius Torquatus and Furius

⁶⁸ Ibid., 107.

Camillus, had enabled the Romans to remain free for centuries and to pursue a policy of continuing conquest that had made their republic mighty and glorious. The strategic and ethical considerations underlying the Roman policy of conquest Machiavelli makes explicit when discussing the destruction of Alba and the pacification of Latium, two episodes belonging to a crucial stage in the Roman development that the modern Florentine republic had yet to reach.

In Discourses II.3, Machiavelli, by quoting Livy's famous dictum "Meanwhile Rome grew from the ruin of Alba" (*Crescit interea Roma Albae ruinis*), invites his Florentine readers to consider how destruction and growth were related in the rise of Roman power. The fate of the ancient city of Alba had been sealed, we learn from Livy, when the Roman king, Tullus, after its conquest in c. 650 bc, had ordered it to be razed and the Alban people transferred to Rome to dwell there. After the destruction, however, great benefits followed for the vanquished. Appearing before them, Tullus solemnly proclaimed that the Roman people were now ready to welcome them into their city. The king made good on his promise. To encourage further settlements in the part of Rome allotted to the Albans, he chose it as the site for his new palace. The foremost among the new settlers he elevated to Roman senators, and many others were recruited to the Roman army, where they were given ranks according to their social status. Since these favors must be seen as excessive and extraordinary, considering that they were bestowed by a conqueror on a vanquished people, it would be simplistic or reductive to claim that the Albans were destroyed, pure and simple. Perhaps, it would be more correct to say that they were destroyed as Albans, before being recreated and benefited as Romans. Another example illustrating how Rome used a combined policy of destruction and benefits to increase in size and strength is provided by Furius Camillus's conquest of Latium in 338 bc, related by Livy and discussed by Machiavelli in *Del modo* and the *Discourses*. In his speech before the Senate, Camillus sets out two radical options for how to deal with the defeated Latins—cruel punishment or kind forgiveness—of which he himself seems to favor a policy of clemency and the extension of citizenship to the vanquished. This latter

policy, Camillus argues, had been made possible through military victory, which had reduced the Latins to an impressionable state and made them susceptible to molding. He therefore urges the Senate to “resolve [their] own anxiety” and make up their minds regarding the fate of the vanquished, who are said to be awaiting their decision in “dull amazement,” and with their “spirits suspended betwixt hope and fear.”⁶⁹ By repeatedly drawing his Florentine compatriots’ attention to this important episode in Roman history, Machiavelli makes them witness a ritual of subjugation and becoming, staged by the conqueror with the purpose of rendering the vanquished more susceptible to the imposition of his new modes and orders. What the Roman art of empire in general, and the conquest of Latium in particular, teaches, Machiavelli implies, is that people are most likely to allow themselves to be molded into obedient subjects, and potential citizens, after having undergone the purgatorial and liminal experience of being torn between the extremes of life and death⁷⁰. Before being recreated as Romans, the Albans and the Latins had been put through this experience and the mental confusion and the loss of identity that go with it.

By a spectacular use of force and terror, the Romans had purged them of their former selves and their former allegiances, before recreating them as Romans, equipping them with Roman arms, and investing them with Roman civic rights. There were thus, if we are to believe Machiavelli, two sides to Rome’s successful imperialism. On the one hand, it involved a policy of destruction that included the razing of cities, mass executions, and the deportation of people; on the other hand, it included a policy of benefits, such as the granting of citizenship, spectacular displays of mercy, and the resettlement of the vanquished in Rome. This two-sided imperial strategy enabled Rome to expand in population, territory, and military might. Its success was clearly visible, when Romans, Albans, and Latins soon

⁶⁹ Hörnqvist, 276.

⁷⁰ *Discourses on Livy*, 183.

could be seen fighting side by side in the Roman army for their common benefit and for the increase of Roman power.

The modern Florentines, with their parochial assumptions, their insistence on the policy of the middle way, and their inability to encompass and to combine the extremes, had never been able to achieve this reshaping of political identities. Whereas the rulers of the Roman monarchy and the early Roman republic had cultivated and developed the complex strategy of destroying and benefiting into a veritable imperialist art, the wise men of contemporary Florence had, because of “their weak education and their slight knowledge of things,” failed to transcend the suffocating limits of the city-state⁷¹. As a consequence, they had failed to convert their neighbors into loyal Florentine subjects willing to fight for the common cause of Florentine, or Tuscan, liberty and empire. To achieve their longstanding aims of liberty and empire, and to find a true republic, Machiavelli contends, his compatriots would have to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of the ancient Roman republic, rethink their foreign policy doctrine based on appeasement and containment, and subject Aristotelian and Christian virtue to radical redefinition. The theoretical insights and the historical lessons it contains would remain ineffective and immaterial, he would have argued, if they were not implemented or applied to the here and now, where political decisions are made and the fates of nations decided. This observation leads us to address the rhetorical level of Machiavelli’s work.

2.4 Productive Tumults: Internal Conflict and Republican Liberty

At the heart of Machiavelli's revaluation of Roman politics lies his celebrated defense of social conflict. In one of the *Discourses*'s most famous passages, Machiavelli argues that the conflicts between the Roman Senate and the plebs, far from weakening the republic, were "the first cause of keeping Rome free."⁷² This claim directly contradicted the prevailing wisdom of humanist political thought,

⁷¹ Hörnqvist, 277.

⁷² Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.6.

which held that civic discord threatened the very foundations of republican government. For writers influenced by Cicero and the rhetorical tradition, *concordia* (harmony among the citizenry) represented the highest political ideal. Machiavelli, by contrast, insisted that such harmony was neither possible nor desirable in a genuine republic.

The argument proceeds from Machiavelli's analysis of what he calls the "two different humors" that exist in every city: the desire of the great to command and oppress, and the desire of the people not to be commanded or oppressed.⁷³ These conflicting desires are permanent facts of political life. Any attempt to suppress this conflict through forced harmony serves only the interests of one party, typically the great, who use appeals to unity to mask their domination. True liberty, Machiavelli argues, requires that both parties have institutional means to pursue their interests and check the ambitions of the other. The Roman constitution achieved this balance through specific institutions: the tribunes of the plebs, who could veto senatorial decrees; popular assemblies that could pass laws and elect magistrates; and the right of appeal to the people in capital cases. These mechanisms did not eliminate conflict but channeled it into relatively stable institutional forms. Rather than leading to destructive violence, these tumults resulted in "laws and ordinances beneficial to public liberty" Machiavelli points out that for over three hundred years, these internal broils in Rome led to very few instances of exile or execution, suggesting they were productive rather than chaotic⁷⁴.

This institutional framework had profound consequences for Roman politics. The people's ability to resist aristocratic encroachment meant that the republic could not easily slide into oligarchy. The constant threat of popular

⁷³ *Ibid.*, I.37.

⁷⁴ For from the time of the Tarquins to that of the Gracchi, a period of over three hundred years, the tumults in Rome seldom gave occasion to punishment by exile, and very seldom to bloodshed. So that we cannot truly declare those tumults to have been disastrous, or that republic to have been disorderly, which during all that time, on account of her internal broils, banished no more than eight or ten of her citizens, put very few to death, and rarely inflicted money penalties. See *Discourses*, 34.

mobilization kept the nobility from overreaching. Yet the system also prevented pure democracy, as the Senate retained significant powers and the constitution provided multiple checks on popular action.

Mikael Hörnqvist argues that Machiavelli's innovative interpretation of the mixed constitution is not a mere restatement of classical theory but a radical reimagining of its purpose. While traditional thinkers from Plato to Polybius viewed the mixed regime as a static system of checks and balances intended to achieve internal harmony, stability, and "concord," Machiavelli envisioned it as a dynamic engine for imperialist expansion⁷⁵. This dynamic equilibrium, unstable and contentious as it was, proved far more durable than political systems based on consensus or the unchecked rule of one class.

The productive character of these tumults extended beyond institutional design to shape Roman civic life more broadly. Machiavelli argues that the conflicts between orders kept political actors vigilant and prevented the complacency that often accompanies stability.⁷⁶ The plebeians' struggles for greater political rights, from the creation of the tribunate to the passage of the Licinian laws opening the consulship to plebeians, forced the republic to evolve and adapt. The popular assemblies, where citizens could express grievances and demand reforms, provided a safety valve for social tensions while ensuring that power remained accountable to a broad citizenry. Even the occasional resort to political violence, while dangerous, demonstrated that no group could completely dominate the republic without facing resistance. Yet Machiavelli's celebration of tumult has important limits. He distinguishes carefully between conflicts that produce good laws and institutions and those that threaten the republic's existence. The Roman conflicts rarely resulted in executions or permanent exile of citizens;

⁷⁵ Hörnqvist further argues that this expansion is achieved through channeling the Prince's "tyrannical impulse" or lust of power towards external goals of territorial growth, acquisition and glory. The prince thus becomes an unwitting "instrument for a Roman-inspired republican development," acting as a founder who embodies the acquisitive spirit necessary to fuel the state's future growth

⁷⁶ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.4-6.

they produced institutional innovations rather than factional bloodshed.⁷⁷ Machiavelli contrasts this pattern with the destructive factionalism of medieval and Renaissance Italian cities, where conflicts between parties regularly led to proscriptions, confiscations, and civil war. The key difference lies in the institutionalization of the conflict. Rome created channels through which conflicting social forces could contend without destroying the republic itself. The tumults were productive precisely because they operated within a constitutional framework that preserved the state even as it allowed for vigorous contestation.

2.5 Military Virtue and the Foundations of Liberty

If institutionalized conflict provides the internal mechanism for preserving republican liberty, military strength provides its external foundation. For Machiavelli, the relationship between arms and freedom is essential rather than incidental. A republic that cannot defend itself cannot remain free, and a people who do not bear arms cannot maintain republican government. This connection between military capacity and political liberty runs throughout Machiavelli's work, from *The Prince's* insistence that "the main foundations of all states are good laws and good arms" to the *Discourses's* extended treatment of Roman military institutions and practices.⁷⁸

The argument begins with Machiavelli's categorical rejection of mercenary armies. Hired soldiers, he argues, are "useless and dangerous": useless because they lack genuine commitment to the state they serve, dangerous because they may turn their arms against their employers or fail to fight when truly needed.⁷⁹ The reliance on mercenaries had become common practice among Italian states by Machiavelli's time, but he viewed it as a symptom of political decay rather than a pragmatic solution to the military needs of commercial societies. A state

⁷⁷ Ibid., I.5.

⁷⁸ Ibid., II.2.

⁷⁹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1993), Ch. 12.

that outsources its defense has already compromised its independence, placing its survival in the hands of those who have no intrinsic stake in its preservation.

Rome's military strength, by contrast, rested on a citizen militia drawn from those who had the greatest stake in the republic's survival. The Roman army consisted primarily of property-owning citizens who fought to protect their land, their families, and their political rights. This arrangement created a powerful alignment of interests: military service reinforced civic virtue, while political liberty provided motivation for military excellence. The citizen-soldier embodied the connection between bearing arms and enjoying freedom, between the capacity for violence and the privilege of political participation. As Machiavelli elaborates in his *Art of War*, the training and discipline required for effective military action cultivated precisely the qualities needed for active citizenship.⁸⁰

This martial foundation of republican liberty extended beyond mere military effectiveness to shape the republic's relationship with religion and moral values. Machiavelli famously criticizes Christianity for making men "weak" and promoting otherworldly values incompatible with political virtue.⁸¹ Roman religion, by contrast, supported military valor and civic engagement. The Romans used religious ceremonies to inspire soldiers before battle, honored military success as the highest form of glory, and structured their entire civic calendar around military campaigns. Religion served the republic rather than standing in judgment over it, providing supernatural sanction for actions necessary to preserve the state's independence and expand its power.

Hornqvist has shown how this argument connects to Machiavelli's broader understanding of virtue (*virtù*). Unlike the humanist conception of virtue as moral excellence cultivated through education and contemplation, Machiavellian *virtù* centers on the capacity for effective action, particularly in military contexts.⁸² Rather than the learned gentleman or the pious Christian, the virtuous citizen

⁸⁰ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Art of War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), Book I.

⁸¹ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, I.11.

⁸² Hornqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire*, 112-115.

appears above all as the armed defender of the republic. This martial virtue creates and sustains republican liberty by ensuring that the people possess the means to resist both external conquest and internal tyranny. A disarmed populace, regardless of its other qualities, cannot maintain free government because it lacks the power to prevent its own subjugation.

2.6 Expansion as Republican Necessity

The most radical element of Machiavelli's republican theory emerges in his treatment of expansion. Where classical traditional republican thought often viewed territorial aggrandizement as a pernicious force that transformed republics into empires and free citizens into imperial subjects, Machiavelli argues that expansion proves fully compatible with republican liberty and indeed essential to it⁸³. In a world of competing states, a republic that does not expand will inevitably be conquered by those that do. The decision concerns expansion or perishing, as peaceful stability results in extinction.

Machiavelli presents this argument most directly in his discussion of whether republics should follow the Spartan model of limited expansion or the Roman model of aggressive growth. Sparta sought to maintain a small, ethnically homogeneous citizen body, refusing to incorporate conquered peoples and limiting territorial expansion.⁸⁴ This strategy preserved internal unity and avoided the corrupting effects of empire, but it also left them vulnerable. When Sparta did eventually expand after the Peloponnesian War, it lacked the institutional capacity to govern a larger territory and quickly collapsed. Rome, by contrast, embraced expansion from the beginning, developing institutions capable of incorporating new citizens and governing conquered territories. This choice made them powerful

⁸³ Traditional classical thinkers (such as Plato, Aristotle, Polybus and Cicero) viewed the republic as a system of checks and balances intended to achieve internal harmony. The primary goal was to remain stable and unchanging in time to avoid the inevitable cycle of decay. Machiavelli elaborates this concept giving the examples of Sparta and Venice, calling them “republics for preservation”, which were destined to fail eventually. For more on this see *Discourses*, 220; 282.

⁸⁴ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, II.3.

enough to dominate the Mediterranean world and gave it the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances.

The Roman system of expansion rested on several key practices. First, Rome offered citizenship to conquered peoples, creating a pathway for integration rather than permanent subjugation.⁸⁵ This policy expanded the military manpower available to the republic while giving conquered populations a stake in Roman success. Second, Rome planted colonies in strategic locations, extending their power while providing land for landless citizens. Third, the empire maintained a policy of preemptive war, striking potential enemies before they could coalesce into serious threats. These practices created a self-reinforcing dynamic: military success brought new resources and manpower, which enabled further expansion, which brought still more resources in a continuous cycle of growth.

Machiavelli insists that this expansionist logic flows from the nature of republics themselves. A republic with a large population and an armed citizenry possesses inherent expansionist tendencies.⁸⁶ The people desire glory and wealth, which can be obtained through conquest. The competitive dynamic between patricians and plebeians channels ambition into military service, as both groups seek honor through military success. The distribution of conquered land provides opportunities for social mobility and alleviates internal tensions over property. Far from being an optional policy that republics might pursue or reject, expansion emerges as a structural feature of republican politics, at least for republics organized along Roman lines.

Yet Machiavelli's case for expansion does not rest solely on the internal dynamics of republican politics. He also presents a hard-headed analysis of the international environment in which republics must operate. Amid rival states striving to expand their power and safeguard their interests, neutrality provides no protection. Weak states will be conquered by strong ones, and states that attempt

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, II.4.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, I.55.

to remain aloof from power politics will find themselves objects of manipulation by more active players.⁸⁷ The only reliable security comes from strength, and the only way to maintain strength is through continuous military readiness and periodic demonstration of military capability. Expansion serves both purposes, keeping the army trained and battle-hardened while demonstrating to potential enemies that the republic possesses both the will and the capacity to defend its interests.

This argument creates a complex relationship between republican liberty and imperial domination. The very mechanisms that secure freedom for Roman citizens: a large, well-trained army; institutions capable of incorporating new populations; a culture that glorifies military success; enable and indeed require the subjugation of others. The republic's internal liberty rests on its external power, which means that the freedom of some depends on the conquest of others. Machiavelli does not shy away from this conclusion but embraces it as a fundamental fact of political life. In a world where power determines survival, moral qualms about domination represent a form of dangerous naivety. The choice is between dominating and being dominated.⁸⁸

2.7 The Machiavellian Moment: Pocock and Republican Time

The historiographical revolution sparked by J.G.A. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment* (first published in 1975) fundamentally reshaped understanding of the republican tradition and Machiavelli's place within it. Pocock's central thesis holds that Machiavelli articulated a distinctive problem of republican politics: the problem of maintaining a republic through historical time in a world subject to fortune and decadence.⁸⁹ This “Machiavellian moment” represented a mode of political consciousness extending beyond a particular set of institutional prescriptions, in which republics understood themselves as temporal entities

⁸⁷ Ibid., II.6.

⁸⁸ Ibid., I.58.

⁸⁹ Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, viii-ix.

struggling against the forces of decay and prosperity. By identifying this problem, Pocock argued, Machiavelli initiated a tradition of political thought that extended from Renaissance Florence through Civil War England to Revolutionary America. His account begins with the claim that Machiavelli confronted a distinctively republican form of temporal anxiety. Classical political philosophy, particularly in its Aristotelian variant, had understood political change primarily through the cycle of constitutional forms (monarchy to tyranny to aristocracy to oligarchy to democracy to ochlocracy and back to monarchy). This cyclical view implied a kind of eternal return in which states inevitably deteriorated but might be restored through the actions of a great lawgiver or the intervention of fortune. Machiavelli, Pocock argues, accepted this framework but added a crucial element: the recognition that republics must actively maintain themselves against corruption through appropriate institutions and practices.⁹⁰ The mixed constitution, armed citizenship, and institutionalized conflict became mechanisms through which republics could resist, though never entirely escape, the forces of temporal decay. This framework generated a distinctive set of concerns that would preoccupy subsequent republican thinkers. If corruption represents the greatest threat to republics, how can it be prevented or at least delayed? What institutions best preserve civic virtue over time? How can a republic maintain the martial spirit necessary for self-defense without being spoiled by military success? How can expansion, necessary for survival, be pursued without destroying the republic from within? These questions, Pocock argues, structured political debate in periods when republican government seemed possible: in Renaissance Italy, Commonwealth England, and Revolutionary America.⁹¹

The concept of the Machiavellian moment proved enormously influential, reshaping historical understanding of several periods. Pocock showed that English political thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries engaged extensively

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 156-182.

with classical republican themes, above all through the work of James Harrington, whose *Oceana* (1656) adapted Machiavellian principles to English conditions.⁹² Harrington maintained that political power follows property and that a stable republic therefore requires a relatively equal distribution of land in order to prevent oligarchy. The dissolution of feudal estates and the rise of an independent gentry appeared to supply precisely such a social foundation in seventeenth century England, while at the same time introducing new dangers: concentrated wealth, especially in the form of mobile property and public credit, could generate dependency and lechery within republican institutions.

Transmitted through opposition Whigs and Country Party thinkers, this neo Harringtonian tradition shaped eighteenth century debates about decay, standing armies, and political economy. Most controversially, Pocock argued that the same republican inheritance profoundly influenced American revolutionary thought and the founding of the United States. The founders worried about corruption, feared permanent military establishments, celebrated armed citizenship, and regarded commerce as a potential source of moral decay, all concerns recognizably Machiavellian in character.⁹³ The Constitution itself, with its mixed government, separation of powers, and mechanisms for checking ambition, embodied principles ultimately derived from Machiavelli's analysis of Rome. Even the creation of a large commercial republic formed part of this engagement, as Americans sought to demonstrate how republican government could extend across a vast territory without succumbing to institutional deterioration or conquest.⁹⁴

2.8 Atlantic Republicanism: Britain and North America

The extension of republican ideas from Renaissance Italy to the Atlantic world therefore involved both continuity and transformation. While core themes

⁹² *Ibid.*, 333.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 507.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 526-552.

persisted, (as mentioned before: anxiety about corruption, the emphasis on civic virtue, suspicion toward standing armies, and commitment to mixed government) they were adapted to different social, economic, and political contexts. The concern with the profiteering potential of commerce and finance became central to eighteenth-century opposition thought in Britain. The wariness was that the growth of public debt, the expansion of patronage, and the creation of a permanent military establishment threatened to transform Britain into a deceitful oligarchy masquerading as mixed constitution. The standing army, funded by public credit and used to support ministerial power, represented precisely the kind of threat that republicans had always feared: armed force controlled by the government rather than the citizens. Within this context Quentin Skinner has shown how the tradition articulated a distinctive conception of liberty as non-domination, according to which freedom consists in independence from arbitrary power rather than simple noninterference.⁹⁵ A people subject to the will of a monarch or oligarchy, even a benevolent one, lacks genuine liberty because its security depends on the discretion of the powerful rather than on the protection of law.⁹⁶

These themes resonated powerfully in colonial America, where distance from metropolitan authority, relatively equal distribution of land, and the prevalence of militia service created conditions favorable to republican politics. The American Revolution articulated itself partly in republican language, with Patriots denouncing British corruption, celebrating American virtue, and warning against the dangers of standing armies and ministerial power. The debates over the Constitution turned extensively on republican questions: Could republican government operate over a large territory? Would commercial development deteriorate civic virtue? Could the new government avoid the cycle of growth, corruption, and decay that had destroyed previous republics? Machiavelli's

⁹⁵ Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 25-27.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 51-57.

influence was pervasive across the republican spectrum, though different writers adopted different aspects of his thought.

Nedham was the pioneer of the English use of Machiavelli's *Discorsi*. In his work *Vox Plebis* (1646), he made the first systematic English public use of the *Discourses* to argue that the people are the best "keepers of liberty". He adopted Machiavellian interest theory to argue that only republics truly look to the common good, whereas monarchs typically harm the city to serve their own private ends⁹⁷. John Pocock identified Harrington as "England's premier civic humanist and Machiavellian". Harrington's *Oceana* was famously described as a "Machiavellian meditation upon feudalism," using Machiavellian concepts to explain the collapse of the Stuart monarchy as a result of a shift in the "balance of property". While Harrington admired Machiavelli, he sought to transcend the Florentine's belief in the inevitability of change and "tumults" by creating an "immortal commonwealth" through perfect constitutional "orders"⁹⁸. Algernon Sidney was heavily influenced by Machiavelli's analysis of the military superiority of republics. Following Machiavelli, Sidney argued that "that is the best Government, which best provides for War" and believed that Roman-style expansion was necessary because states that do not grow must eventually perish⁹⁹.

English writers like Milton, Nedham, and Sidney frequently cited Sallust's observation (repeated by Machiavelli) of how remarkably Rome grew once it had become free. This narrative of the rapid rise of Rome after the expulsion of its kings helped justify the English regicide and the ambitious state-building that followed¹⁰⁰. Most English republicans followed Machiavelli in choosing the Roman model of expansion over the Venetian model of preservation. They believed that the English republic, like Rome, must either grow or be ruined. This Roman inspiration fueled the republic's aggressive maritime and military policies.

⁹⁷ Scott, Jonathan. *Commonwealth principles: republican writing of the English Revolution*. Cambridge University Press, 2004, 137.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 227.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

By the 1690s, these Machiavellian and Roman ideals had been so thoroughly integrated into British political thought that John Toland could describe London as a "New Rome in the West," destined to be the "Soverain Mistress of the Universe" through its liberty and trade¹⁰¹. Finally, these studies suggest that while Machiavellian themes indeed shaped Atlantic political thought, they did so in interaction with other traditions and under specific local conditions.

Recent scholarship has complicated this picture considerably. Philip Pettit has developed the neo-republican emphasis on non-domination into a systematic political theory applicable to contemporary politics.¹⁰² Gordon Wood has shown how American republican ideas evolved from classical models emphasizing virtue to more modern conceptions based on institutional checks and representation.¹⁰³ Bernard Bailyn has demonstrated the complex mixture of republican, liberal, and Protestant elements in American revolutionary ideology.¹⁰⁴ Finally, these studies suggest that while Machiavellian themes indeed shaped Atlantic political thought, they did so in interaction with other traditions and under specific local conditions.

Conclusion

Machiavelli's own imperial dreams and his imagined Florentine republic of the future were never to materialize. The Medici's intention of becoming newborn Romans, it soon became clear, did not extend beyond the ritual arena of Florence, and Machiavelli's hope of seeing them use the moral and financial backing of the Church to pursue Florence's longstanding aspirations to become a new Rome, not only culturally, but also politically and militarily, would rapidly begin to fade. According to Guicciardini, who had come to accept Machiavelli's general view that states undergo cycles of birth, rise, maturity, and senescence, Florence was

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 346.

¹⁰² Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 51-79.

¹⁰³ Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 46-53.

¹⁰⁴ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 55-93.

unfit for radical reforms and constitutional innovations, since the city was aging and already on her way down. Guicciardini further argued that Machiavelli in idealizing the ancients had turned a blind eye to their manifest shortcomings, and omitted to mention several valuable modern political and military innovations of which they had been ignorant. It is a mistake, Guicciardini states in his Ricordi, to “quote the Romans at every turn,” since following the Roman example in all situations would require a city that lived under identical conditions. In the same way as it would be foolish to “expect an ass to race like a horse,” he implies, it is ridiculous to believe that tired old Florence could follow in the footsteps of ancient Rome¹⁰⁵. The success of the Roman republic, Guicciardini contends, is beyond replication.

However, for his many disciples and followers, Machiavelli’s work would come to serve as an inexhaustible source of worldly wisdom, a storehouse of cynical maxims, and a fundamental link back to classical political philosophy. It offered an antidote to wishful thinking and a rite of initiation into the *arcana imperii* and the art of rhetorical manipulation. These new Machiavellians would in his overall theory also find many things on which to improve. While they accepted his general premises, the rise of capitalism, the discoveries of modern science, and the continuous progress in technology allowed them to draw other conclusions from them. The insight that trade, technical innovations, and capital investments may lead to global economic growth made obsolete the Florentine’s zero-sum view of the world, but at the same time strengthened his claim that the pursuit of self-interest may contribute to the public good. Important advances in the applied sciences and in military technology made outmoded his all-inclusive Roman model, but at the same time provided the moderns with new powerful means to realize the time-honored aims of the Roman republican tradition, liberty and empire.

¹⁰⁵ Guicciardini, Ricordi, 2nd series, n. 110 in Guicciardini, Scritti politici e ricordi, p.308: “volere che uno asino facessi el corso di uno cavallo.” English translation in Guicciardini, Dialogue on the Government of Florence, p.173.

Chapter 3: Gibbon and the Invention of Imperial Decline

Introduction

When Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) published the first volume of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in 1776, the same year as American independence and Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, he provided the modern world with more than historical narrative. Born in 1737 into moderate wealth, he received the classical education typical of his class, though his intellectual formation occurred largely outside universities, which he found intellectually moribund. A youthful conversion to Catholicism led to exile in Switzerland, where his father sent him for reconversion to Protestantism. There he encountered French Enlightenment thought and developed the rationalist, cynical approach to religion that would define his historical work.¹⁰⁶ After returning to England and serving briefly in the Hampshire militia during the Seven Years' War, he embarked on the Grand Tour, visiting Rome in 1764. There, sitting "amidst the ruins of the Capitol" while "barefooted friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter," he conceived his project.¹⁰⁷ The contrast between pagan grandeur and Christian poverty crystallized a narrative about how Rome had fallen: not through barbarian invasion but through internal transformation wrought by Christianity and the despotic government it supposedly supported.

His six volumes, completed in 1788, elaborated a framework for understanding empire itself: as a trajectory from virtuous origins through corrupting success to inevitable collapse. Writing at the height of British expansion, Gibbon transformed Rome from antiquarian curiosity into a mirror for contemporary anxieties. His readers encountered a story in which greatness

¹⁰⁶ J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, Vol. 1: The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon, 1737-1764 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3-8.

¹⁰⁷ Edward Gibbon, *Memoirs of My Life*, ed. Georges A. Bonnard (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1966), 136.

contained the seeds of its own destruction, where luxury bred weakness, where the mechanisms of imperial control (armies, centralized bureaucracy, autocratic power) poisoned the society that had enabled conquest. The work became, and largely remains, the definitive account of how empires die: through slow internal rot, a process so gradual that contemporaries barely perceive it until collapse arrives.

This chapter examines how Gibbon constructed his interpretive framework and why it proved so influential across diverse contexts. As James Theodore argues in *The Modern Cultural Myth of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Gibbon invented a powerful cultural myth that has shaped Western thinking about empire, power, and historical change ever since.¹⁰⁸ His achievement lay in establishing a template that subsequent generations would apply to their own dominions and those of their rivals. The declensionist interpretation he perfected offered a compelling story with clear moral implications: empires contain internal contradictions ensuring eventual downfall. Success brings complacency, wealth produces corruption, power requires despotism, expansion overextends resources. Once identified in Rome, this pattern became portable, applicable to any imperial formation from ancient Persia to modern America. Yet Gibbon's account was a product of specific eighteenth-century concerns: anxieties about British governance, debates about virtue and commerce, and the Enlightenment project of finding cycles in history that could guide political action. As David Womersley has argued, the work must be understood as both history and political intervention, shaped by the immediate crises of the 1770s as much as by ancient sources.¹⁰⁹

This chapter traces both the construction of Gibbon's declensionist framework and its enduring influence, showing how a specific eighteenth-century interpretation became the dominant lens for thinking about imperial arcs. It also

¹⁰⁸ Jonathan Theodore, *The Modern Cultural Myth of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1.

¹⁰⁹ David Womersley, "Introduction," in Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley (London: Penguin, 1994), Vol. 1, xi-xliv.

outlines its transmission through subsequent scholarship and political discourse, and recent challenges questioning the "myth" of deterioration, asking whether his pattern describes historical reality or imposes a misleading template on complex processes.¹¹⁰

3.1 The British Context: Empire, Classics, and Eighteenth-Century Thought

Eighteenth-century Britain was simultaneously experiencing rapid imperial expansion and intense anxiety about its political and moral consequences. The Seven Years' War (1756-1763) had established Britain as Europe's dominant power in North America and India, but victory brought new problems that seemed to threaten the constitutional balance Britons credited for their liberty. Could Britain govern vast territories with diverse peoples without replicating the despotic systems used by France and Spain? Would the wealth flowing from empire corrupt British society, as luxury had allegedly corrupted Rome? Would the armies necessary for imperial control threaten British liberty, as professional soldiers had enabled Roman emperors? Would centralization required for effective imperial administration undermine the balanced constitution?¹¹¹ As David Armitage has demonstrated, these questions formed part of a broader debate about the very nature and legitimacy of British imperialism.¹¹²

These debates unfolded almost exclusively through reference to classical precedents, particularly Rome. The British elite received an education saturated in Greek and Latin texts: what historians have called the "classical education" defining gentlemanly status. Every educated gentleman could quote Cicero's orations, had read Livy's account of the Roman Republic and Tacitus's caustic analysis of imperial corruption, and understood contemporary politics through classical analogies. This classical framework shaped political consciousness in

¹¹⁰ Theodore, *Modern Cultural Myth*, 1-15.

¹¹¹ David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 125-145.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 146-170.

fundamental ways. The texts provided vocabulary for political concepts, examples for constitutional arrangements, and warnings about political dangers. Rome provided both positive and negative models: the Republic demonstrated how civic virtue and constitutional balance could produce greatness, while the Empire showed how success could corrupt virtue and lead to despotism. The transformation from Republic to Empire, from free citizens to subjects of autocratic emperors, offered a cautionary tale particularly relevant to Britain balancing parliamentary government with expanding power. Eighteenth-century political actors genuinely believed they could learn from Roman experience, that history revealed patterns applicable to their own circumstances.

One strand of debate, represented by radical Whig figures like Richard Price (1723-1791) and Catharine Macaulay¹¹³ (1731-1791), warned that Britain was following Rome's path to corruption. Imperial conquest, these critics argued, brought dangerous concentrations of executive power, armies threatening parliamentary liberty, and commercial wealth corrupting the society in general.¹¹⁴ Drawing on civic republican thought that emphasized the fragility of political liberty, they insisted republics required virtuous citizens willing to prioritize public good over private interest. Empire, with its attendant luxury and military power, inevitably corrupted this virtue. Another strand, articulated by writers like Adam Smith and Josiah Tucker, argued that commerce and empire need not corrupt virtue but could enhance liberty and prosperity.¹¹⁵ Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, published alongside Gibbon's first volume, offered a fundamentally different vision of commercial society: one where economic development promoted civilization rather than corruption. Gibbon himself embodied the contradictions of eighteenth-century British imperialism and Enlightenment thought.

¹¹³ Neither Macaulay nor Price were strictly republican, they were radical Commonwealth or real Whig writers in the civic-republican tradition who prized republican liberty but did not call for abolishing the monarchy.

¹¹⁴ Richard Price, *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* (London, 1776); Catharine Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James I to that of the Brunswick Line* (London, 1763-1783).

¹¹⁵ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London, 1776); Josiah Tucker, *A Treatise Concerning Civil Government* (London, 1781).

As a man of the Enlightenment, Gibbon committed himself to rational inquiry and remained skeptical of supernatural explanations. His approach combined meticulous scholarship in ancient sources, he read Greek and Latin with ease and consulted an extraordinary range of primary materials, with a philosophic desire to identify general patterns and causes. J.G.A. Pocock has argued persuasively that Gibbon participated in the eighteenth-century attempt to write "philosophical history": history that would reveal forces shaping human societies and provide guidance for political action.¹¹⁶ Influenced by Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Hume, this project assumed history followed discoverable cycles, that reason could identify causes of political change, and that past experience offered lessons for present policy. The *Decline and Fall* exemplified this approach while remaining grounded in specific evidence, distinguished from more speculative Enlightenment histories by its massive erudition.

3.2 The Architecture of Decline: Gibbon's Narrative Structure

The *Decline and Fall* sprawls across six volumes and roughly 4,000 pages, covering more than thirteen centuries from the age of the Antonines to the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Yet this vast chronological sweep follows clear narrative logic embodying Gibbon's interpretive assumptions. Beginning with Rome at its apex (the empire under the "five good emperors," particularly Marcus Aurelius), his opening chapters famously declare this era "the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous," establishing a baseline against which all subsequent change appears as loss.¹¹⁷ From this height, the account traces a long, irregular but ultimately inexorable descent through third-century crisis, barbarian invasions, Christian triumph, Byzantine endurance, and final collapse.

¹¹⁶ Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, Vol. 1, 9-45.

¹¹⁷ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley (London: Penguin, 1994), Vol. 1, chapter 3.

Gibbon's method combined narrative history with philosophical analysis in ways distinguishing his work from both earlier antiquarian scholarship and more speculative Enlightenment histories. Stories of emperors and generals, battles and intrigues, theological controversies and barbarian migrations are described with dramatic flair, ironic wit, and often devastating sarcasm. His prose style, influenced by classical models like Tacitus, creates inevitability through rhetorical structures that prefigure outcomes. Yet he continually interrupts the narrative to analyze causes, identify patterns, and draw general conclusions about the nature of imperial power. This combination of vivid storytelling and analytic commentary allowed him to present his declensionist thesis both as historical facts derived from specific evidence and as philosophical truth about the nature of political systems¹¹⁸. Readers experience Rome's fall through concrete events: the assassination of Commodus, the conversion of Constantine, the sack by Alaric; while simultaneously absorbing general principles about how empires function and fail. This dual register made the work both enjoyable to read and intellectually compelling, accessible to general audiences while maintaining scholarly credibility through its massive documentation and careful argumentation.

The periodization he employs reveals his interpretive framework and political assumptions. The crucial turning point comes with internal transformation. What follows the "golden age" of the Antonines is not immediate collapse but gradual erosion spread across centuries, a temporal structure making Gibbon's work both more credible than catastrophist accounts and more applicable to contemporary imperial anxieties. This slow-motion deterioration meant Britain, though showing some signs of Roman problems, still had time to correct course. The periodization was itself an interpretive choice with political implications: Gibbon could have organized his material differently, emphasizing discontinuities, regional variations, or transformation. Instead, he chose a framework making

¹¹⁸ Miller, Perry. *The New England mind: From colony to province*. Harvard University Press, 2009.

every subsequent development appear as deviation from an ideal standard, as progressive loss of something once possessed.¹¹⁹

3.3 Gibbon's Causal Mechanisms: How Empires Fall

Gibbon's account of imperial deterioration rests on several interrelated causal mechanisms, each reflecting eighteenth-century political and moral concerns while claiming to derive from Roman evidence. The first involves corrupting effects of absolute power on both rulers and ruled. Concentrated authority inevitably produces despotism, which eliminates civic participation, which is essential to political health. This analysis echoes Montesquieu, whose *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline* (1734) Gibbon knew well. Montesquieu had already argued that the very extent of Roman conquest dissolved the civic virtue and political equilibrium that had sustained the Republic, so that greatness itself generated the conditions of decay¹²⁰. Under the Republic, citizens held magistrates accountable through elections and public debate, participated in policy formation through popular assemblies, and maintained constant vigilance against tyranny. Under emperors, this active citizenship gave way to passive obedience.¹²¹ The transformation from citizen to subject represented, rather than merely constitutional change, fundamental alteration in political psychology, creating populations incapable of self-government. As J.G.A. Pocock has demonstrated, Gibbon adapted republican tradition's analysis of how power corrupts virtue, applying it to explain Rome's transformation.¹²²

The second mechanism centers on luxury and its moral effects: perhaps Gibbon's most persistent theme. Wealth corrupted Roman virtue through multiple channels. The point recalls Montesquieu's argument in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) that democratic republics rest on virtue understood as frugality, so that

¹¹⁹ Theodore, *Modern Cultural Myth*, 35-72.

¹²⁰ de Secondat Montesquieu, Charles, Charles de Secondat Baron de Montesquieu, and David Lowenthal. "Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline." (1999).

¹²¹ Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, Vol. 1, chapters 13-15.

¹²² J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 423-461.

luxury corrodes the egalitarian restraint on which popular government depends. It also marks a pointed contrast with Machiavelli, for whom expansion and greatness were preconditions of a republic's endurance rather than, as for Gibbon, the seedbed of its decay. The austere farmers and soldiers who built the Republic, living simply on their own land and serving without pay from civic duty, replaced by aristocrats more concerned with extravagant banquets and refined pleasures than military service or responsibility towards the polity. Gibbon writes:

"The decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest; and, as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight."¹²³

This argument drew on ancient sources, particularly Sallust and Juvenal, who had themselves lamented Roman moral corruption.¹²⁴ Yet it also engaged debates about the relationship between commerce and civic virtue. Where some Enlightenment thinkers, including Smith, argued that trade promoted civilization by refining manners and creating interdependence, Gibbon emphasized luxury's corrupting potential. Imperial riches brought refined culture (art, literature, philosophy) but also moral softness making Romans unable to defend what their ancestors had conquered. The wealthy preferred to pay others to fight rather than serve themselves, undermining the citizen-soldier ideal that republican theory considered essential to liberty. This created a vicious cycle: wealth enabled leisure, leisure encouraged refinement, refinement bred softness, softness necessitated hiring others for defense, and hired defenders lacked the civic commitment of citizen-soldiers.

¹²³ Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, Vol. 3, chapter 38.

¹²⁴ Ibid., Vol. 1, chapters 2-3.

The third mechanism involves Christianity, Gibbon's most controversial claim and the aspect generating the most immediate criticism. With carefully calibrated irony, he argues that Christian otherworldliness weakened martial spirit and civic commitment essential to imperial defense. Here Gibbon reproduces, perhaps unwittingly, the argument of Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* that a corrupt people loses the capacity for self-government and that civic religion should serve, not undermine, martial and political virtue, the nexus examined in the preceding chapter. Where pagans valued military honor and duty, Christians emphasized forgiveness, humility, and afterlife salvation.¹²⁵ While acknowledging Christianity's moral teachings, he insists its triumph contributed to imperial weakness. This argument served multiple purposes: attacking religious enthusiasm and ecclesiastical power while appearing to defend classical civilization, aligning Christianity with despotism since emperors used religious authority to buttress political power, and suggesting irrational belief posed dangers to political stability.¹²⁶ The controversy this generated was immediate and sustained. Critics accused Gibbon of attacking Christianity itself, of displaying prejudice against religion, of misrepresenting Christian doctrine. Defenders noted that Gibbon carefully distinguished between Christian morality, which he praised, and Christian theology, which he suggested had unintended political consequences.

The debate obscured how the argument functioned within Gibbon's larger framework. By suggesting that Christianity contributed to imperial weakness through encouraging unearthly focus and passive acceptance of suffering, Gibbon could explain Roman transformation without resorting to supernatural explanations or divine judgment. Christianity became another factor in a complex causal system rather than either divine punishment or divine blessing. This naturalistic explanation aligned with Enlightenment commitments to rational inquiry and skepticism of supernatural causation. Moreover, by suggesting

¹²⁵ 18. *Ibid.*, chapter 15.

¹²⁶ Womersley, "Introduction," xxii.

Christianity aligned with despotism (since Christian emperors from Constantine onward used religious authority to legitimate autocratic power, bishops as administrative officials, and employed theological orthodoxy as a test of political loyalty) Gibbon reinforced Enlightenment critiques of church-state collusion. The argument had contemporary political relevance: if Christianity had weakened Rome by encouraging political passivity and supporting despotism, what implications did this have for eighteenth-century Britain where the established Church supported monarchical authority? Gibbon never stated these implications explicitly, but contemporary readers recognized them, making the Christianity chapters among the most politically charged sections of the entire work.

The fourth mechanism concerns military transformation and what might be called the paradox of imperial defense. As sense of duty eroded and Romans grew unwilling or unable to serve in armies, emperors increasingly recruited Germanic tribesmen from beyond the frontiers. These barbarian soldiers learned Roman military techniques and adopted Roman organization but retained their own loyalties and ambitions.¹²⁷ Eventually, barbarian generals seized power for themselves, first controlling emperors as puppet-masters, then eliminating the imperial office altogether. Military strength had become military vulnerability: forces assembled to defend the empire became instruments of its dissolution. The mechanism had obvious contemporary relevance for Britain, which increasingly relied on mercenary forces and colonial troops for imperial defense. Gibbon's contrast between the citizen-soldier and the hired barbarian restates a central Machiavellian theme: the *Discourses* and *The Art of War* warn that mercenary and auxiliary armies are both militarily unreliable and politically corrosive, since troops without civic attachment ultimately serve their commanders rather than the commonwealth.

These mechanisms interconnected to create what modern scholars might call a system dynamic. Despotism produced luxury by concentrating wealth and

¹²⁷ Ibid., Vol. 3, chapter 26-30.

eliminating accountability. Luxury eroded patriotism by making citizens soft and unwilling to sacrifice for public good. This made barbarian recruitment necessary since Romans would no longer defend themselves. Barbarian recruitment enabled conquest by those very barbarians. Christianity both resulted from and reinforced this process, offering otherworldly consolation to populations who had lost political agency. Each element reinforced the others, creating a self-accelerating process of deterioration with no obvious exit points.

3.4 The Contemporary Relevance: British Anxieties and Roman Parallels

Gibbon's contemporary readers would have immediately recognized parallels between Rome and Britain, even though he never explicitly drew such comparisons. Both were expanding empires with traditions of parliamentary or republican government, both faced questions about how to govern diverse territories without replicating despotic systems of their rivals, both worried about whether commercial wealth and military power threatened traditional liberties. Eliga Gould argues in *The Persistence of Empire* that Gibbon's work spoke directly to British anxieties about whether their empire could avoid Rome's fate, whether parliamentary government could survive imperial expansion, whether the mechanisms of imperial control would corrupt the liberty they were meant to protect.¹²⁸ The *Decline and Fall* never explicitly compares Britain to Rome (such directness would have been politically dangerous) but the parallels saturate the text. Contemporary reviews understood this immediately: an early reviewer noted that "the English reader will find in almost every page matter of useful instruction for the present times."¹²⁹

Gibbon's treatment of imperial overextension, a theme recurring throughout the *Decline and Fall*, would influence imperial theorists for centuries. His repeated emphasis on how Roman conquests became unsustainable (distant

¹²⁸ Eliga H. Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 142.

¹²⁹ J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, Vol. 3: The First Decline and Fall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 267-298.

provinces drained resources while providing diminishing returns and the empire became too large to govern effectively from a single center) resonated with British readers in 1776 confronting analogous questions with immediate urgency. American colonies were in active rebellion, partly because of disputes over governing and taxing distant territories.¹³⁰ Could Britain effectively govern both India and America? Would imperial administration require centralizing power in ways threatening both parliamentary government at home and local autonomy in the colonies? Armitage argues that many eighteenth-century Britons interpreted Gibbon's history as illustrating a broader tension between imperial expansion and the preservation of a free constitution.¹³¹ This concern parallels Edmund Burke's argument during the impeachment of Warren Hastings that misgovernment in the colonies would reverberate back upon the metropole as returning nabobs imported the habits of arbitrary power, corrupting the constitution at home¹³². The larger an empire grew, the more resources it required for defense and administration, but expansion also increased potential threats and vulnerability points. Paul Kennedy would later formalize this logic as "imperial overstretch," but the concept originated in Gibbon's analysis of Roman frontiers.¹³³

Discussion of regular armies spoke to British anxieties with roots in seventeenth-century constitutional conflicts. For eighteenth-century Britons, standing armies represented fundamental threats to liberty: professional soldiers loyal to commanders rather than civic institutions could become instruments of tyranny.¹³⁴ Yet empire required military force deployed at great distances. Gibbon's account showed how this dilemma destroyed Rome: civic militias proved inadequate for imperial defense, requiring professionalization. Professional armies

¹³⁰ Ibid., Vol. 3, chapter 11

¹³¹ Armitage, *Ideological Origins*, 146.

¹³² Burke, Edmund. "Speeches on the impeachment of Warren Hastings." (1987).

¹³³ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), xv-xxv.

¹³⁴ Arthur Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 15-35

enabled despotism. Eventually, professional soldiers turned on the state they were meant to protect. Britain faced the same tension.

Treatment of luxury and commerce resonated with debates about commercial society's political effects. Was Britain's commercial wealth a source of strength or weakness? Gibbon's ambivalence reflected broader eighteenth-century uncertainty.¹³⁵ Acknowledging that wealth enabled cultural achievements, he nonetheless insisted prosperity also produced moral softness and political passivity. This analysis offered no clear prescription for British policy: an ambiguity perhaps reflecting Gibbon's own position as a prosperous gentleman in commercial society, enjoying its benefits while fearing its long-term consequences.

3.5 The Influence and Transmission of the Declensionist Narrative

The *Decline and Fall* achieved immediate success that translated into enduring influence across multiple domains. It became the standard account of Roman history for educated audiences, shaping how generations understood imperial trajectories. Theodore observes that Gibbon's interpretive framework proved extraordinarily portable, applied to empire after empire over subsequent centuries with remarkable consistency.¹³⁶ The declensionist template became the default way of thinking about imperial power: all empires rise through virtue, reach a peak, then inevitably fall through internal corruption. This influence manifested first in historical scholarship. Gibbon's periodization and causal framework structured research for generations. Questions he posed (When did decline begin? What caused it? Could it have been prevented?) defined the research agenda for Roman history well into the twentieth century.¹³⁷ His footnotes, displaying extraordinary erudition in ancient sources, guided subsequent scholarship by identifying which

¹³⁵ Womersley, "Introduction," xxviii.

¹³⁶ Theodore, *Modern Cultural Myth*, 73.

¹³⁷ Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, Vol. 3

sources mattered and how they should be read. Even historians who rejected his answers continued working within the problematic he established.

In political discourse, leaders and commentators invoked Gibbonian tropes with remarkable consistency. Nineteenth-century British imperialists debated whether they could avoid Rome's fate. J.R. Seeley argued in *The Expansion of England* that British empire differed fundamentally because it was commercial rather than military, based on free trade rather than conquest.¹³⁸ Yet even optimistic assessments employed Gibbon's framework: the question was whether Britain's specific circumstances exempted it from the general pattern. Critics of empire like J.A. Hobson inverted the analysis in *Imperialism: A Study*, arguing imperial expansion was itself a form of corruption that diverted resources from domestic development and concentrated power in unaccountable hands.¹³⁹ Twentieth-century American debates employed similar vocabulary. Paul Kennedy's influential *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* explicitly drew on Gibbonian logic to explain how military commitments could exceed economic capacity. Kennedy writes: "If a nation overextends itself strategically [by the conquest of extensive territories or the waging of costly wars] it runs the risk that the potential benefits from external expansion may be outweighed by the great expense of it all."¹⁴⁰ This formalization of "imperial overstretch" represented a parallel of Gibbon's analysis, adapted to twentieth-century geopolitical realities. Kennedy's comparative analysis of great power rise and fall across five centuries consistently identified the same pattern Gibbon had described: initial success based on economic and military strength, expansion of commitments requiring increasing resources, eventual exhaustion when costs exceeded capacity. Kennedy's work influenced American policy debates in the late 1980s and 1990s, with commentators asking whether American global commitments (military bases worldwide, security guarantees to allies, military interventions in various regions)

¹³⁸ J.R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England* (London: Macmillan, 1883), 1-20.

¹³⁹ J.A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (London: James Nisbet, 1902), chapters 1-3.

¹⁴⁰ Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, xxiii.

represented sustainable policy or dangerous overextension. The vocabulary came directly from Gibbon through Kennedy: "decline," "overstretch," "imperial overcommitment."

American leaders from the Founders onward worried whether their republic would follow Rome's path to empire and despotism.¹⁴¹ These anxieties intensified as American power grew. Charles Maier's *Among Empires* analyzed American power through comparative imperial history, concluding that empires are constantly threatened by overreach and the difficulties of maintaining peripheral control.¹⁴² Maier traces how empires historically struggled with the challenge of projecting power over distance, maintaining control over diverse populations, and sustaining the resources necessary for defense and administration. He argues that American power after World War II constituted a form of empire, not territorial empire in the traditional sense, but rather an empire of influence, military bases, security guarantees, and economic relationships. This "empire by invitation" faced many of the same challenges Gibbon identified in Rome: the costs of maintaining order in peripheral regions, the difficulty of projecting power effectively over distance, the temptation to overextend commitments beyond sustainable limits. Niall Ferguson's *Colossus* (2004) asked whether America constituted an empire and, if so, whether it faced Roman problems, ultimately arguing that America suffered from "the limits of its own ambition."¹⁴³ Ferguson contends that America possesses many attributes of empire such as global military presence, economic dominance, cultural influence; but lacks the imperial will necessary to sustain long-term commitments. Where historical empires like Rome or Britain accepted the burdens of imperial governance, including long-term occupation and administration of conquered territories, America seeks to exercise influence without accepting these costs. Ferguson argues this creates instability:

¹⁴¹ David Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 101-124.

¹⁴² Charles S. Maier, *Among Empires: American Ascendancy and Its Predecessors* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 34.

¹⁴³ Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 289.

American interventions are frequent but limited in duration and commitment, creating power vacuums when America withdraws. This pattern, he suggests, represents a distinctively modern form of imperial dysfunction different from Rome's but no less problematic. Cullen Murphy's *Are We Rome?* (2007) drew explicit parallels between contemporary America and ancient Rome, finding disturbing similarities in military overextension, political dysfunction, and cultural change.¹⁴⁴ Murphy identifies parallels in the privatization of military functions (comparing Roman reliance on barbarian foederati to American use of private military contractors), in political polarization and institutional gridlock, in the growth of economic inequality, and in declining civic participation. While acknowledging differences between ancient and modern contexts, Murphy argues that structural similarities suggest America faces analogous challenges requiring attention. All these works, despite their different political orientations and conclusions, operated within the Gibbonian framework, using his vocabulary and accepting his premise that empires faced inherent contradictions leading to potential deterioration. Whether optimistic or pessimistic about American prospects, whether viewing American power as empire or something different, these scholars employed Gibbonian categories to analyze contemporary power. The persistence of this framework in scholarly and policy analysis demonstrates Gibbon's enduring influence on how educated audiences think about power, empire, and political stability.

3.6 Challenging the Myth: Recent Scholarship and the Decline Debate

Before turning to that modern scholarship, it is worth distinguishing two registers in which Gibbon worked, since conflating them obscures both his achievement and the terms on which it can be criticized. In one register Gibbon was a historian reconstructing Rome: collating sources, weighing testimony, and establishing what could be known about the empire's long unraveling, the labor that earned the

¹⁴⁴ Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), chapters 2-5.

Decline and Fall its enduring scholarly authority. In the other he was an Enlightenment moralist and political thinker using Rome as a blueprint, mining the ancient past for general laws of imperial corruption that could instruct a Britain anxious about its own expanding dominion. These registers were never fully separable for him. As Womersley argues, the work was at once history and political intervention,¹⁴⁵ and Pocock's reconstruction of Gibbon's "philosophical history" shows how the impulse to narrate Rome and the impulse to legislate for the present were, in eighteenth-century practice, one enterprise.¹⁴⁶ The point is not that Gibbon was a covert pamphleteer disguising polemic as scholarship, but that his account was shaped throughout by the conviction that history yielded portable lessons, a conviction his sources did not impose but his century did. This matters for what follows, because the modern scholarship that has challenged him operates almost entirely in the first register: it asks whether Gibbon got Rome right, marshaling archaeological and documentary evidence he never had.¹⁴⁷ It rarely engages him in the second register, where his deeper claim lies, not that Rome declined in this or that respect, but that empires as such follow a discoverable arc from virtue through corruption to collapse. To answer the historian is not yet to answer the political theorist, and much of the framework's persistence, traced in the previous section, depends on the survival of the second Gibbon long after the first has been substantially revised.

This recent scholarship has fundamentally challenged Gibbon's declensionist framework, questioning both specific historical claims and broader interpretive assumptions. Theodore argues that Gibbon created a powerful cultural myth that misrepresents what happened to Rome by imposing a moralistic pattern derived from eighteenth-century concerns onto complex transformations defying simple categorization.¹⁴⁸ Rather than inevitable collapse driven by moral

¹⁴⁵ Womersley, "Introduction," xi-xliv.

¹⁴⁶ Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, Vol. 1, 9-45.

¹⁴⁷ See Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*; Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*; and Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History*.

¹⁴⁸ Theodore, *Modern Cultural Myth*

corruption, scholars now emphasize continuity alongside change, adaptation in response to new challenges, and transformation into different but not necessarily inferior forms. The Roman world didn't simply "fall" but evolved into new political and cultural configurations: Byzantine civilization in the east and various barbarian kingdoms in the west, that preserved and transformed Roman elements.

Peter Brown's influential work pioneered reframing "Late Antiquity" as a distinct civilization deserving study in its own right. In *The World of Late Antiquity*, Brown argues that where Gibbon saw only loss and degeneration, the period actually witnessed creativity, religious innovation, and cultural achievement that shouldn't be judged simply as inferior versions of classical models.¹⁴⁹ Late antique art, literature, and theology developed new forms representing genuine cultural achievements. Christianity, rather than weakening civilization, created new forms of community, intellectual tradition, and cultural expression. Brown writes: "We are no longer concerned with the decline and fall of the Roman empire, but with the rise of a new civilization."¹⁵⁰ This reframing challenged the fundamental assumption that change necessarily meant deterioration.

Bryan Ward-Perkins countered vigorously this view by insisting material evidence shows genuine collapse. In *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization*, Ward-Perkins argues that the end of the Roman West witnessed horrors and dislocation of a kind that we can fortunately only glimpse, and it destroyed a civilization that had taken centuries to build up.¹⁵¹ Archaeological data reveals declining living standards, abandoned cities, lost technologies, and economic contraction that shouldn't be euphemistically relabeled as "transformation." Pottery production declined dramatically, sophisticated building techniques were lost, literacy rates fell, and urban populations shrank. Ward-Perkins contends that

¹⁴⁹ Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 7.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵¹ Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 183.

the pottery from the excavations that he had studied in recent years increasingly convinced him that a remarkable continuity and sophistication in the production and distribution of pottery existed throughout the Roman period, and that this suddenly and spectacularly ceased in the fifth century.¹⁵² These material changes represented real deterioration in living conditions for ordinary people, not just elite cultural transformation. Ward-Perkins provides extensive archaeological evidence showing that ordinary Romans in the fourth century enjoyed access to mass-produced goods (pottery, tiles, glass, metalwork) that disappeared in the fifth and sixth centuries. This was not simply "different" but demonstrably worse: people lived in smaller houses, used cruder tools, had access to fewer goods, and died younger. Ward-Perkins argues that Brown's emphasis on elite cultural creativity obscures the material collapse experienced by the vast majority of the population.

Yet even Ward-Perkins questions whether "decline" adequately describes these processes. The debate thus hinges partly on what aspects of society one emphasizes: Brown privileges cultural creativity and transformation, Ward-Perkins privileges material conditions and economic capacity. Both recognize the limitations of Gibbon's moralizing framework, yet they disagree fundamentally about whether "decline" accurately describes what happened and what alternative framework should replace it. Arthur Herman observes in *The Idea of Decline in Western History* that "decline" is not a demonstrable historical process but a recurring interpretive habit within Western thought. From classical Rome to twentieth-century cultural pessimists, intellectuals repeatedly portray their own age as inferior to an idealized past, often during periods of material expansion and creativity. Herman shows that after Gibbon the language of historical explanation adopted a life-cycle model (growth, maturity, decay) which later writers treated as a quasi-law of civilization. As a result, narratives of degeneration reveal more about cultural anxiety, social change, and the status of elites than about objective historical deterioration; the idea of decline functions less as evidence of collapse

¹⁵² Ibid., 105.

than as a framework through which societies make sense of modernity (Herman, 1997).¹⁵³

Scholars have also challenged each of Gibbon's specific causal mechanisms. Did Christianity really weaken Roman military effectiveness? Evidence suggests Christian emperors from Constantine through Theodosius maintained formidable armies winning significant victories. Christian soldiers and generals proved no less effective than pagan predecessors. Did luxury corrupt Roman virtue and military capability? Archaeological evidence shows economic prosperity often correlated with military and political strength rather than weakness. Did despotism eliminate civic participation? Recent work emphasizes the continued vitality of local government and civic institutions throughout the imperial period. Each mechanism, when examined with evidence unavailable to Gibbon, proves more complex and ambiguous than his account suggests.

More fundamentally, critics question whether "decline" is a useful analytical category. Theodore argues that the concept assumes a clear standard against which to measure deterioration, but such standards prove elusive and often reveal more about the values of those doing the measuring than about historical reality.¹⁵⁴ Declining by what measures? Military power? Economic productivity? Cultural achievement? Political stability? Different metrics yield different conclusions. Moreover, "decline" suggests a unified process affecting the entire empire uniformly, when evidence shows tremendous regional variation. The western empire fragmented into barbarian kingdoms while the eastern empire continued for another millennium. Some areas experienced disruption while others thrived. The declensionist framework obscures this complexity by forcing diverse developments into a single narrative.

Despite scholarly critiques undermining many of Gibbon's specific claims, declensionist thinking retains remarkable cultural power extending far beyond

¹⁵³ Herman, *Idea of Decline*

¹⁵⁴ Theodore, *Modern Cultural Myth*, 145.

academic debates. Political commentators regularly invoke Gibbonian tropes when discussing contemporary powers, warning of "decline," "overstretch," and "fall." This persistence suggest the declensionist framework serves political needs that scholarly accuracy alone cannot fulfill: psychological, political, and moral needs explaining its endurance despite mounting evidence of its limitations.¹⁵⁵ By warning of "decline" (in political sphere) commentators can express concern about current developments without appearing merely partisan, they claim to derive insights from historical wisdom rather than ideological opposition. Moreover, declensionist rhetoric often implies the speaker possesses special insight into long-term trends invisible to others, conferring intellectual authority. Both critics and defenders of existing power structures can employ declensionist rhetoric: critics warn that current policies accelerate deterioration, while defenders argue their policies can reverse it, but both accept the basic framework.

Conclusion

The persistence of Gibbon's framework in political discourse despite scholarly refutation raises important questions about the relationship between historical accuracy and cultural influence. Kennedy, Maier, Ferguson, and Murphy all operate within Gibbonian categories even while acknowledging limitations of the analogy between ancient Rome and modern powers. Theodore argues this persistence reflects the framework's ability to serve psychological, political, and moral needs beyond historical accuracy; providing satisfying explanatory narratives, enabling political critique, and aligning with moral intuitions about power and corruption.¹⁵⁶ The contemporary significance lies in enduring questions the framework raises. Do empires contain inherent contradictions ensuring eventual collapse? Does success inevitably produce conditions for failure through mechanisms like overextension or corruption? Can complex political communities sustain themselves indefinitely or do all human arrangements eventually decay?

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 183-220

¹⁵⁶ Theodore, *Modern Cultural Myth*, 183.

Armitage contends that these questions remain relevant regardless of whether Gibbon's specific answers prove historically accurate, demonstrating how his work continues to shape political thought even as historians reject his conclusions.¹⁵⁷

Gibbon's greatest achievement may have been making empire itself a problem requiring critical explanation. By presenting Roman deterioration as a puzzle to be solved through historical analysis and suggesting imperial collapse resulted from discoverable cycles, he established empire as a subject for secular, rational inquiry. His work suggested empires followed patterns human reason could identify, that understanding those patterns could inform political practice, and that the fate of empires should concern anyone interested in political stability. Whether one accepts his specific declensionist thesis or not, this framing of empire as a problem for historical and political analysis remains essential to modern political thought.

The tension between Gibbon's rhetorical power and his historical accuracy reflects a broader challenge: how to learn from history without imposing patterns that distort what we seek to understand. Creating a captivating tale about Rome that continues to shape how we think about empire, his work provides vocabulary and frameworks structuring contemporary debates. Yet compelling stories can mislead if they substitute narrative satisfaction for careful analysis, if they impose predetermined conclusions on ambiguous evidence. The task for contemporary readers is to appreciate Gibbon's achievement while recognizing its limitations, to learn from his insights about power and institutions while avoiding the trap of treating his specific interpretation as universal template. This requires precisely the kind of critical, skeptical inquiry that Gibbon himself exemplified. We honor his legacy not by accepting his conclusions uncritically but by applying his methods to his own work, subjecting the *Decline and Fall* itself to the same skeptical scrutiny he brought to ancient sources.

¹⁵⁷ Armitage, *Foundations*, 124.

Chapter 4: Bonaparte between Republic and Empire

Introduction

Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) embodied the legacy of Rome with great intensity and political consequence. From the schoolrooms of Brienne to the imperial palaces of Paris, from the triumphal arches of a newly ordered Europe to the windswept exile of Saint Helena, ancient Rome was Napoleon's constant interlocutor, which he searched simultaneously for legitimation, self-understanding, and for the grammar of new imperial order. This relationship can be described as a complex dialectic of appropriation and resistance, of selective identification and deliberate distancing, shaped at every stage by the political exigencies of the time. Symbolism starts to be performed: inscribed on bronze and stone, embodied in triumphal processions, sounded in the Latin phrases of imperial coronations. The result is a novel form of imperial sovereignty that is both modern and ancient, revolutionary and conservative, and the myth of Rome acts like a constitutive element of political legitimacy and international order. However, it's important to mention that even before the French revolution, ancient Rome was used serving different political agendas. Before the Revolution (1789), sovereigns such as François I, Henri II, and Henri IV all translated the antique into architecture and ritual. For instance, the Paris of Henry IV was compared to Augustan Rome for its urban modernization. Louis XIV most explicitly adopted imperial Roman model to project absolute power: he was frequently portrayed as Augustus or Caesar, particularly in his military triumphs; his architects, such as Blondel and Perrault built permanent triumphal arches (Porte Saint-Denis) that were larger than their original Roman counterparts (to signal that France had surpassed antiquity);

he established the French Academy in Rome (1666) to ensure French artists could study and replicate classical models¹⁵⁸.

The French Revolution marked a major shift, rejecting the “decadent” imperial models of the monarchy in favor of the ideals of the Roman Republic¹⁵⁹. Rome began to be perceived primarily as a source of political example for the new citizen. The two Brutuses (the Brutus who revenged the rape of Lucretia and drove out the Etruscan King Tarquin, and the Brutus who was spurred by Julius Caesar’s hunger for power to plot his assassination) became models for the Republican citizen¹⁶⁰. Napoleon came to power in this context, and he was capable to navigate both of these worlds using both languages: first Republican Rome (with the revolutionary language) remained indispensable so long as revolutionary legitimacy had to be preserved, but when the stabilizing and expansive ambitions of the Napoleonic regime increased, he switched to more imperial repertoire through which concentrate authority and seek continental domination. But before dwelling into this, we shall start from Napoleon’s early formation.

4.1 The “Man of Plutarch”: Bienne Education and Formation of Napoleon

Napoleone di Buonaparte was born on Corsica in 1769. Ironically, not as an Italian, but as a Frenchman, and in consequence a subject of Louis XV (the island had only ceased to be under Genoese control in 1768). Instrumental in forming Bonaparte’s personality were his visions as a youth to liberate Corsica from the clutches of the French and thus succeed where his idol, Pascal Paoli (leader of the Corsican independence movement), had failed¹⁶¹. Bound intricately to this was the emphasis

¹⁵⁸ Rowell, Diana. *Paris: The New Rome of Napoleon I.* (2012): 92,107-118.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 23

¹⁶⁰ Edwards, C. (1999). *Napoleon I: a new Augustus?*. *Roman Presences: Receptions of Rome in European Culture*, 1789-1945, 53.

¹⁶¹ The same Paoli, during an excursion to Porta Nova in Corsica around 1790, stated that Napoleon belonged entirely to Plutarch: “« O Napoléon! Tu n'as rien de moderne! Tu appartiens tout à fait à Plutarque! » This anecdote, of which survive several versions across memoirs and recollections, captures something essential about the texture of Napoleon’s intellectual formation. The old Corsican independence leader, himself an avid reader of Livy and Plutarch, looked at the brilliant, studious young officer and saw a character lifted from the pages of ancient biographers: a man of historical grandeur. The episode is worth

in schools in eighteenth century mainland France on the teaching of the moral integrity, courage and military prowess of antiquity's heroic exemplars. Several classical works were mandatory components of the educational curriculum. The histories of Plutarch, Livy and Tacitus were studied, as well as literary pieces such as Cicero's Orations, Ovid's Metamorphoses and Virgil's Aeneid¹⁶².

After a brief spell of study at the college in Autun, he was sent to the royal military school at Brienne. Bonaparte's education here was to have a considerable influence upon the formation of his personality. It was during these early years that a somewhat aloof and insular Bonaparte immersed himself in the lives and glorious conquests of antiquity's great exemplars, not least Julius Caesar. The distance that separated Bonaparte from his beloved Corsica, and his insatiable appetite for study and the reading of ancient works, notably Plutarch's Lives, nurtured further his visions of fighting heroically for the liberty of his people¹⁶³. The dream of becoming his own Plutarchian hero was thus in the making, and a little nearer being realized when, some 5 years later in 1784, he gained a scholarship to the prestigious Parisian École Militaire. This marked the beginning of Bonaparte's training as a professional soldier: at 16, he had already graduated and attained the status of sub-lieutenant of artillery. By the early 1790s, the talented young soldier had managed (eventually) to return to his homeland between postings to military establishments such as the esteemed artillery school at Auxonne.

Equally significant was Bonaparte's love for writing. An underlying preoccupation in many of his notes with the despotic nature of monarchical rule, as Tulard affirms, reveals the extent to which the young Corsican was influenced by Rousseau and other 'philosophes révolutionnaires'¹⁶⁴. Due also to the French

pausing over, not least because of its deliberate ambiguity. As Santagelo has pointed out, Paoli's comment could be read in at least two registers: either as tribute ("you are like a character of Plutarch", figure of great moral importance whose significance transcends time; or a gentle warning, "you are an obsessive reader of Plutarch who behaves according to moralistic parameters ill-suited to actual reality". For more on the topic see Rowell, 19.

¹⁶² Lyons, Martyn. *Napoleon Bonaparte and the legacy of the French Revolution*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 1994.

¹⁶³ Ellis, G. (2014). *Napoleon*. Routledge.

¹⁶⁴ Tulard, Jean. *"Le mythe de Napoléon."* (1971).

belief that Corsican nobility was somehow inferior to their own but, in main, to his ability to be on whichever side was on top, Bonaparte was not labelled an aristocrat after the outbreak of the Revolution in 1789. This, combined with his aptitude, charisma and thirst for personal conquest, resulted in a speedy advancement and his involvement in numerous offensive maneuvers. By 1792, he had joined the French army in Italy and, several promotions and 4 years later, Bonaparte – whose decisive hand in defeating royalist rebels in 1795 had earned him the reputation of saviour of the Republic – was named the commander-in-chief of the French Republic's Army of Italy¹⁶⁵. With Napoleon's campaign in Italy, France controlled the principal centers of the Italian States: Milan, Naples and Rome. In true Napoleonic fashion, press reports reaching Paris regaled the occupation's successes, conveniently omitting anything that might spoil their leader's glorious image as universal conqueror.

The reality was a bit different, and the regime was quite unpopular due to its economic and social degradation¹⁶⁶. However, Napoleonic rule was responsible for the restoration of the ancient Roman city. Some of the examples include: the beautification of the northern entry into Rome (including Piazza del Popolo and the Pincian Hill); inscriptions, frescoes and literary works in the city's green areas and urban gardens; archeological activity concentrated on structures such as the Pantheon, Trajan's Column, the Colosseum and the Arch of Constantine. This immense interest in the city's resurrection, maintenance and embellishment can be seen as the projection of Rome's new role as the Empire's "second city" (Paris being the "first", of course)¹⁶⁷. One can assume the explicit symbolic intent to the immortalization of Rome's great figures through the construction of monuments,

¹⁶⁵ Rowell, 20.

¹⁶⁶ Wrought by the confiscation of monasteries and convents, the deportation of clergy who refused to sign the oath of loyalty; the imposition of conscription and above all, the expulsion of Pope Pius VII, which not only increased hostility towards the French in the Papal States, but also shocked Europe, turning the Pope into a veritable martyr. For more, see Ridley, Ronald T. *The eagle and the spade: archaeology in Rome during the Napoleonic era*. Cambridge University Press, 1992, 5-8.

¹⁶⁷ Part of a decree dating to 17 February 1810 announced: 'The city of Rome is the second city of the Empire'

which had major role to play in the later construction of Paris, where the Emperor, as we will discuss later, drew inspiration for his own “Rome” for triumphal arches and the monumental Vendôme Column.

4.2 The French Revolutionary Context

The French Revolution was not a singular event which simultaneously changed France’s infrastructure, but rather, a sequence of incidents, uprisings and, to an extent, homogeneous phases punctuated by varying revolutionary regimes, spanning a decade or more. Though France was not proclaimed a republic until 21 September 1792, the storming of the Bastille (14 July 1789) marked the historical and symbolic beginning of the Revolution¹⁶⁸. In essence, the Revolution’s *raison d’être* (hence its adoption of the egalitarian ideals of the Roman Republic) was to promote a new symbolic order; an improved non-hierarchical society, in total contrast to the absolutist and despotic ideology of the monarchy, and the decadence associated both with it and with Imperial Rome. Importantly, the definition of ‘new’ was changing constantly. Given the didactic nature of visual stimuli and the rapid political changes, architects and artists were under immense pressure to keep up with demand: as a result, many works were either unfinished or unable to keep pace with the changing climate¹⁶⁹. The projection of la *nouvelle ère* was manifest in a profusion of media ranging from the reinvention of Republican Rome’s figures, symbols, spectacle, ritual and political terms, to Rome inspired art, sculpture and architecture *parlante* (the prolific use of the latter enabled the powers-that-be to ‘speak’ to the citizen through words, symbols and images). A suitable point of reference lies with Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825), the

¹⁶⁸ Interestingly, the storming of the prison was the result of a misunderstanding on the part of its governor; in reality, very few people were harmed, and it was only after the episode had been sensationalized and turned into a veritable example of the people’s victory over tyranny that the fortress was torn down (a task finished by commercial companies). This acts as a pertinent example of how the manipulation of fact had already become a forceful political tool. It also exemplifies how revolutionary propaganda was to influence Napoleon’s equally elaborate falsification of fact to serve political ends. For more, see Connelly, O. (2012). *The wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon, 1792–1815*. Routledge.

¹⁶⁹ Johns, Christopher MS. *Antonio Canova and the politics of patronage in revolutionary and Napoleonic Europe*. Univ of California Press, 1998.

influential French artist whose ‘neo classical’ works materialized during the ancien régime and spanned both the revolutionary and the Napoleonic periods. Masterpieces such as David’s Oath of the Horatii (1784) and Brutus (1789) not only act as examples of the influence antiquity (and post-antique adaptations of Romanitas, exerted prior to the Napoleonic epoch) but their popularity as expressions of revolutionary fervor may also be used to highlight the emphasis placed on the ideals of Republican Rome¹⁷⁰.

Revolutionary symbols were equally reminiscent of classical Rome: examples include the Roman lictor’s axe and fasces (or ‘rods’). Likewise, Roman deities such as Minerva and the demi-god Hercules were reinvented. Figures such as the Gracchi, Cato, Cicero and the Brutuses were appropriated; their actions and political affiliations praised and also used to furnish the Revolution’s new rhetoric¹⁷¹. Cato the Elder was seen by the revolutionaries as a model of the antique Roman, whose *virtus* and patriotism were traits that every citizen was encouraged to respect. Significantly, the American colonists who struggled to overthrow England in the American War of Independence (1775–83) had also called upon Republican Rome in their quest to advocate a new beginning (France had even played a role in helping the colonists). Plutarchian exemplars were subsequently adopted, and used as forceful expressions of American liberty and *virtus*¹⁷². Alternatively, Caesar was perceived as the antithesis of everything that revolutionary America stood for: the dictator epitomized England; his image seen to encapsulate tyranny and the corruption of the nation’s moral fabric. In

¹⁷⁰ A degree of caution is required, however, for although David’s Oath of the Horatii had become a poignant symbol of revolutionary propaganda by the 1790s, the relationship between the French Revolution and the Horatii brothers swearing they would ‘win or die for liberty’ was not as explicit as many have argued. In 1785 the painting was exhibited and received as a pro-monarchical piece; in 1791 the canvas was returned to the Salon and hailed instead as a forceful revolutionary emblem. (See Siegfried, S., & Porterfield, T. (2005). *Staging Empire: Napoleon, Ingres, and David*). This speaks volumes about the political sub-context of art during the revolutionary years (in relation both to its creation and reception) and also about the dexterity with which the antique was manipulated to serve (conflicting) contemporary rhetoric.

¹⁷¹ Rowell, 24.

¹⁷² Malamud, Margaret. "Manifest destiny and the eclipse of Julius Caesar." *Julius Caesar in Western Culture* (2006): 148-169.

revolutionary France, Caesar was to be received in a similar manner, except that here he typified the despotic monarchs of the country's absolutist past. The influence of revolutionary America might also help qualify the initially paradoxical fusion between France's quest to project a new beginning and its simultaneous exploitation of Republican Rome's rhetoric.

As the Revolution evolved and the appeal of prototypes such as Cato began to wane, a less radical Republican France sought inspiration from a slightly different angle and adopted an additional dimension, that of Augustus. Such a choice was far from coincidental and most apt, as Augustus' potentially precarious position as successor to the assassinated Caesar was cleverly manipulated to the new leader's advantage by his forming the Principate, a new form of rule which continued to recognize republican ideals¹⁷³. If then we consider Bonaparte's continuation, but modification of revolutionary ideals (his crowning as Emperor, and not as King after the consulship), it is possible to appreciate how influential both the Revolution and the antique past were in shaping his constitutional position. Furthermore, the hugely fragile post-revolutionary climate, as the chaos wrought upon Rome after Caesar's assassination, resulted in both Paris and Rome being ready for the changes 'Octavian' and 'Bonaparte' had in store. Equally noteworthy is Octavian's name-change to Augustus (27 BCE); Bonaparte's adoption of the title Napoleon and with this, the sovereign's respective metamorphoses from Consul to Emperor¹⁷⁴. It is vital, however, that we recall earlier transformations of Paris within an Augustan context, as shown by a bust of Louis XIV with the accompanying inscription, *Augusto Augustior* 'more august than Augustus'¹⁷⁵.

¹⁷³ Edwards, 53.

¹⁷⁴ Tulard, 188-189.

¹⁷⁵ Freeman, C. (2014). *Egypt, Greece, and Rome: civilizations of the ancient Mediterranean*. Oxford University Press, 588.

4.3 The Napoleonic Era

4.3.1 The Consulate Period (1799-1804)

The Napoleonic era is a period in the history of France and Europe. It is generally classified as including the fourth and final stage of the French Revolution, the first being the National Assembly, the second being the Legislative Assembly, and the third being the French Directory. The Napoleonic era begins roughly with Napoleon Bonaparte's coup d'état on 18 Brumaire, overthrowing the Directory (9 November 1799), establishing the French Consulate, and ends during the Hundred Days and his defeat at the Battle of Waterloo (18 June 1815). During the period of the Consulate (1799–1804), when political survival and legitimacy required Napoleon to adhere to a republican model, he behaved with calculated caution, utilizing Roman Republican terminology and the "Augustan" tactical approach to mask his centralization of power¹⁷⁶.

Following the coup of 18 Brumaire (1799), Napoleon established the Constitution of L'An VIII, which was strikingly Roman in its nomenclature. He presented himself not as a monarch, but as a First Consul, a legitimate magistrate of the Republic, assisted by a "consul of peace" and a "consul of war". The legislative structure included a Tribune and a Senate, further grounding his authority in recognizably republican (yet effectively centralized) Roman forms¹⁷⁷. Napoleon's political genius during this period lay in his understanding of the Principate of Augustus¹⁷⁸. Recognizing that the French people would not yet tolerate a return to monarchy, he modeled his rise on Octavian's transition to Augustus¹⁷⁹. In 1802, when the Senate proposed making him Consul for life,

¹⁷⁶ Edwards, 53-55

¹⁷⁷ Santangelo, Federico. "Napoleon and Ancient Rome: The Models of the Republic and the Empire, 1779-1815." *FuturoClassico FCI* 8 (2022): 98.

¹⁷⁸ Edwards, 55.

¹⁷⁹ Augustus, who learned the lesson from Caesar's assassination, implemented a new mode of rule which, while respecting the forms of Roman Republic, established different kind of government: the Principate. This Roman lesson was understood by Bonaparte, who instead of tempting to restore the monarchy, appropriated the Republic by becoming Napoleon, Emperor of the French, in 1804

Napoleon performed a tactical move used by Augustus¹⁸⁰: he refused the offer, claiming only the people had the right to grant such an extension. By putting the question to a public vote, he secured a massive mandate (3,577,299 who took part 3,568,855 voted in favor) that provided his rule with a facade of popular sovereignty while effectively granting him permanent authority¹⁸¹. This reassured citizens that the Republic was still "in operation". When faced with internal opposition that accused him of contradicting the republican spirit (such as during the establishment of the Légion d'Honneur in 1802) Napoleon used his knowledge of Roman history to outmaneuver critics. To those who argued that republics should not have social distinctions, he countered that the Roman Republic was built on distinctions (patricians, knights, etc.) and rewards like "mural crowns" and triumphs. He argued that honors were a necessary tool to manage the "Gallic" spirit, which he believed prioritized honor over abstract equality¹⁸². While he utilized Roman parallels, Napoleon was careful to distinguish himself from the negative perceptions of Julius Caesar as a usurper. In the early Consulate, his supporters circulated pamphlets (such as the *Parallèle entre César, Cromwel, Monck et Bonaparte*) that argued Caesar was a "subverter of the primacy of the

¹⁸⁰ in September or October 37 BCE, when he, not yet Augustus but Octavian, refused to rule as a triumvir for the second time without the consent of the people and when, in 36 BCE at the end of the civil wars, he proposed to Antony that they should surrender their triumviral powers. Antony's refusal worked to Octavian's advantage. Octavian's progressive 'handover' or restoration of power to senate and people, mainly from 28 BCE onwards, led these latter to offer Augustus a succession of honors and new forms of power which served to constitute the Principate, while at the same time Augustus could claim to have restored the Roman Republic.

¹⁸¹ Rowell, 55.

¹⁸² Napoleon's reply to Théophile Berlier, who objected the Légion d'Honneur: "We are always being told about the Romans! It is rather peculiar that in order to reject distinctions, one cites the example of the people among whom they were most pronounced. Is this truly knowing history? The romans had patricians, knights, citizens, and slaves. They had different costumes and customs for each. They bestowed all sorts of distinctions as rewards: names commemorating services, mural crowns, triumphs! They even employed superstition. Take away religion from Rome, and nothing remains. When this fine body of Patricians ceased to exist, Rome was torn apart; the common people were nothing but the vilest rabble; we saw the fury of Marius, the proscriptions of Sulla, and then the emperors. Thus, Brutus is always cited as the enemy of tyrants. Well! Brutus was merely an aristocrat; he only killed Caesar because Caesar wanted to diminish the authority of the Senate in order to increase that of the people. That's how ignorance or partisanship distorts history. I defy anyone to show me an ancient or modern republic in which there were no distinctions! I don't believe the French people love liberty and equality; the French people are not changed by ten years of revolution; they are what the Gauls were, proud and fickle. They have only one sentiment: honor." See Santangelo, 96-97.

nobility" and a "demagogue," whereas Napoleon was a "legitimate consul" who rallied property owners against chaos¹⁸³. Napoleon publicly distanced himself from these comparisons when they became too politically sensitive, signaling his desire to be seen as the "savior" of the Republic rather than its destroyer. Perhaps, the task was to underline the exceptional greatness of Napoleon, on one hand, and to mark a clear contrast with certain aspects of Caesar's precedent. On the other hand, Rome is reinterpreted (once again) to underline the political projects in play: through defining Caesar a "demagogue", we can understand what Napoleon aspired not to be (or what some of his supporters aimed to avert)¹⁸⁴. Furthermore, he positioned himself as the "natural mediator" between the old order of the monarchy and the new order of the Revolution¹⁸⁵. Politically, he acted as a "dictator of public safety" for the bourgeoisie, providing stability and protecting the property rights established in 1789 while ending the radical chaos of the Terror.

This allowed him to maintain republican support while steadily eroding actual republican institutions¹⁸⁶. His political behavior was also shaped by a fear of losing control, stemming from the Coup of 1799, where he briefly lost his nerve when facing an angry parliament. This event left a deep impression on him, reinforcing his belief that a leader must always appear to be in control of the political arena, just as he was on the battlefield. He concluded that Caesar's political failure was due to wanting to "please the people too much," which taught Napoleon to prioritize centralized strength under the cover of republican forms¹⁸⁷. Napoleon eventually moved beyond comparisons with Roman emperors. In Antonio Canova's 1811 statue, he was presented as a demi-god; the statue was later taken to Wellington's London residence as a victory trophy. These comparisons were more broadly "Roman" than specifically "Caesarian," but for educated French audiences in the early nineteenth century, the distinction mattered

¹⁸³ Santangelo, 97-98.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 99.

¹⁸⁵ Rowell, 158.

¹⁸⁶ Wyke, Maria, ed. *Julius Caesar in western culture*. John Wiley & Sons, 2008, 298.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 286-287.

little. Figures such as Trajan, Julius Caesar, and Roman-style divine rulers all carried similar imperial meanings¹⁸⁸.

4.3.2 The Imperial Period (1804-1815)

In 18 May 1804 Bonaparte was proclaimed Emperor of the French. One of the most significant shift was the formal move toward a hereditary rule. Napoleon believed that the theoretical concept of kingship by divine right had died with Louis XVI, leaving a "gap in legitimacy" that he sought to fill¹⁸⁹. Once again, the people were consulted and there was even less opposition to the plebiscite - the Constitution established that he would be succeeded by his heirs¹⁹⁰. It is worth mentioning that language also mattered greatly during his coronation, which confirms Bonaparte's use of history to legitimize his aspiration to be seen as modern Roman emperor. Not only did the ceremony employ traditional Latin liturgy, but Pius VII intoned the *Vivat imperator in aeternum* (may the emperor live forever): it was the first time it had been used since Charlemagne's coronation a thousand years before¹⁹¹. Napoleon encouraged the perception of a close parallel between himself and Charlemagne, presented then to the French as the great successor of Roman emperors (Holy Roman Emperor from 800 to 814), responsible for the formation and the idea of France. This claim of "divine" inheritance finds similarity in Augustus, which through his adoptive father Caesar, inherited Julian ancestry: the lineage of Romulus, Mars, Aeneas and Venus¹⁹². The appropriation of the antique went further still, as it played a similarly intrinsic role in Napoleonic legislation. The Code Napoléon (1804) was regarded by the emperor himself as one of his principal achievements. As the 'restorer of laws', a life-sized sculpture was placed in the middle of the assembly room in the Palais Bourbon; it should perhaps come as no surprise that Napoleon was dressed

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 289.

¹⁸⁹ Wyke, 297-299.

¹⁹⁰ Later in 1811, To solidify this legacy, he bestowed the title "Roi de Rome" (King of Rome) on his son, using Roman foundation myths to link his dynasty to the Eternal City)

¹⁹¹ Turk, Thomas N. "Napoleonic Latin inscriptions." French History 35.1 (2021): 58.

¹⁹² Huet, 56.

as a Caesar¹⁹³. Nonetheless the Code, together with the Parisian sewer system, which was modelled on the Roman one, suggests he behaved like Rome's "good emperors", such as Trajan or Vespasian, by providing humanitarian and utilitarian works. Huet portrays him like a "true Roman" in this strong sense of the practical and prosaic, where the Greek "ideal beauty" is leaving the first place the utilitarian urbanism, which the emperor preferred.

From Augustus, other than the tactical refuse of power, the Principate model, and the "good emperor" image, Napoleon took also some symbolic borrowings. For instance, his military victories were celebrated as State holidays, and his birthday (15 August) became a national feast¹⁹⁴. He also modelled his medallic history on Augustus's *Res Gestae*, using medals to "literally inscribe himself" onto his empire. His medals often bore the Augustan titles IMPERATOR AVGVSTVS and the formula SPQR (The Senate and the People) to project popular sovereignty¹⁹⁵.

As for Julius Caesar, Napoleon's identification was primarily focused on his military success. He studied and dictated commentaries on Caesar's campaigns (the *Précis des guerres de Jules César*), advising his officers to "model yourself upon them" to become a great captain¹⁹⁶. Other imperial adaptations include the symbol of the Imperial Eagle (which replaced the revolutionary symbols); the Triumphal architecture (such as the Arc de Triomphe and Vendôme Column); even the transformation of the hair fashion, decreeing short hairstyle seen as "Roman" (Titus model) in contrast to the long hair favored during the revolution.

Despite these borrowings, Napoleon was highly selective to avoid being viewed

¹⁹³ Rowell, 31.

¹⁹⁴ Wyke, 291.

¹⁹⁵ Turk, 52.

¹⁹⁶ Caesar was published in a compilation of Military Maxims of Napoleon: "Read again and again the campaigns of Hannibal, Caesar, Gustavus Adolphus, Turenne, Eugene, and Frederick. Model yourself upon them. This is the only means of becoming a great captain, and of acquiring the secret of the art of war." This maxim had a considerable influence in military academies of the nineteenth century and beyond. See Wyke, 287.

as a "bad" emperor or a tyrant. While he used Latin for medallic prestige, he insisted that major monuments carry French inscriptions, arguing that French had surpassed Latin as the most cultivated modern language. (CIT) He explicitly refused titles like "Augustus" or "Germanicus" for his monuments, fearing they linked him to "unsavory" and "bloodthirsty" rulers like Nero or Domitian. He also distanced himself from Caesar the politician. In 1812 Napoleon told the Prefect Barante that he adored Caesar as a military commander but disliked him as a politician: "Caesar wanted to please the people too much, therefore he failed to get complete control of political power."¹⁹⁷ Only two years later (1814), when the allied armies invaded France, he showed his military genius and gained surprising victories even though he lost the campaign. So, he was not defeated primarily on the battlefield, but in the political arena (for example, the political decision concerning the continental system which forced the military might of his empire to be overstretched). Ironically, failing "to get complete control of political power" was, therefore, not only Caesar's problem, but also that of his critic, Napoleon.

4.4 Monuments, Latin, and the Urban Performance of Imperial Legitimacy

Napoleonic Paris, like ancient Rome, functioned simultaneously as a nucleus of political power and as a visual medium through which the authority and ideological ambitions of its ruler could be read. In both settings the interplay of monument, urban space, and ritual served at once to placate and to instruct the populace, while projecting the city's pre-eminence as a center of culture and universal authority. According to Rowell, Napoleon's "New Rome" rested upon a "trialectic" relationship with the past, synthesizing ancient Roman precedent, Revolutionary ideals, and the monarchical grandeur of Louis XIV, as he sought to transform Paris into an imperial metropolis that would eclipse every other city, past and present.¹⁹⁸ This ambition was realised most conspicuously in the city's triumphal monuments, each of which translated a particular Roman prototype into the fabric of the capital.

¹⁹⁷ Wyke, 286.

¹⁹⁸ Rowell, 1.

The Arc de Triomphe de l'Étoile, raised at the summit of the Champs-Élysées and adapted from the single-bay form of the Arch of Titus, functioned as a *porta triumphalis* that made good on the Emperor's promise that his soldiers would return home through arches of victory; its axial alignment, a characteristically Roman device of view-framing, drew the eye directly toward the Tuileries, the seat of imperial power. The Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel, set between the Louvre and the Tuileries and modelled on the arches of Septimius Severus and Constantine, commemorated the victory at Austerlitz (1805) and was crowned with the antique Horses of St Mark's, taken from Venice as *spolia*; it served as the entrance to a projected "Napoleonic Forum" conceived, on the model of the *Forum Romanum*, as the political and military heart of the empire. The Vendôme Column adapted Trajan's Column almost one to one, immortalising the campaigns of the Grande Armée of 1805–07, yet was designed to surpass its model: Napoleon made it taller than Trajan's and sheathed it in bronze melted from cannon captured at Austerlitz, a literal use of war booty that consciously echoed Roman practice.¹⁹⁹ Erected where an equestrian statue of Louis XIV had been torn down during the Revolution, it re-baptised the space with Napoleonic authority and was surmounted by a statue of the Emperor in Roman imperial dress. The same logic of *translatio* governed the Louvre, recast as a "New Capitol" (*nouveau Capitole*)—the symbolic heart of the empire, as the Capitoline temple of Jupiter had been of Rome—whose accumulation of seized antiquities allowed Napoleon's publicists to claim that cultural and political authority had passed from Rome to Paris.²⁰⁰ Beyond these celebratory structures, the regime also pursued a programme of utilitarian and humanitarian works in the manner of Rome's "good" emperors,

¹⁹⁹Pliny the Elder (c. 23–79 CE), the Roman senator and author of the encyclopaedic *Natural History*, records that the statue of Jupiter on the Capitol, erected by Spurius Carvilius after his victory over the Samnites (293 BCE), was cast from captured breastplates, greaves, and helmets. The statue surmounting the Vendôme Column likewise raised Napoleon, in the manner Pliny reserved for the most esteemed figures, above ordinary mortals. See Rowell, 60.

²⁰⁰Rowell, 48.

demonstrating technological mastery and civic benevolence in order to win the affection of the populace.²⁰¹

If the monuments spoke through form, the regime spoke no less deliberately through words. As Censer notes, François Furet held that Napoleon governed as though “power resided ... in words, not social classes”.²⁰² Turk has shown that Napoleon made more extensive public use of Latin across the Empire than any secular ruler since Roman times, despite his own distaste for its grammar, treating it as the language of authority, continuity, and posterity: because Latin was “fixed” and immune to the drift of spoken tongues, it was chosen for medals and monuments so that his deeds might pass undistorted to future generations.²⁰³ Most inscriptions were short, formulaic phrases that functioned like modern “sound bites”, easily read and remembered even by a largely illiterate and polyglot population; and although Napoleon approved each text, their composition fell to Vivant Denon and Pierre-Antoine Daru, who alternated between Latin, French, and Italian according to audience and context.²⁰⁴ Their efficacy, Turk argues, depended on the populace’s familiarity with liturgical Latin from the Mass: terms such as *Imperator*, *Rex*, and *Princeps* carried a resonance congregants already recognised from religious rites.²⁰⁵ Lacking the hereditary legitimacy of the Bourbons, Napoleon used the language to reach back to Augustus and Charlemagne, modelling his inscriptive style on Augustus’s *Res Gestae* and exploiting a syntax that allowed his name and titles (*Neapoleoni*, *Imperator*, *Augustus*) to stand first regardless of grammatical function, so that even a casual

²⁰¹These included a new sanitary system and the Canal de l’Ourcq, modelled on Roman sewers and aqueducts, through which Napoleon emulated the “good” emperors who earned popular affection by means of technological mastery and public utility (Rowell, 117); the church of La Madeleine, conceived as a *Temple de la Gloire* for the Grande Armée and given a classical façade modelled on the Maison Carrée at Nîmes; and the Fontaine de la Victoire (Fontaine du Palmier) in the Place du Châtelet, a victory column that doubled as a functional fountain, reflecting the Roman use of water projects to display imperial power and benevolence.

²⁰²Censer, Jack R. *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution*. Penn State Press, 2003, 183.

²⁰³Turk, 1.

²⁰⁴Turk, 68.

²⁰⁵Turk, 57.

passer-by would register them at a glance. Unlike predecessors such as Louis XIV, who reserved Latin for abstract pieties, he deployed it to advertise tangible achievements (the *Code Napoléon*, new schools, public works) addressing his subjects, in Turk's phrase, directly and frequently, and so becoming the first modern propagandist.²⁰⁶

4.5 Foreign Policy and the Roman Expansion–Decadence Debate

The emphasis placed thus far on Napoleon's domestic self-fashioning should not obscure the international and properly strategic dimension of his Roman inheritance, for the dialectic of republic and empire that structured his bid for legitimacy was equally a grammar of foreign policy. The eighteenth century had received Rome above all through one great debate: the question of whether the city had endured for as long as its arms continued to expand, or whether the very wealth and luxury that conquest brought in its train had corroded the martial virtue on which its greatness rested. Expansion and decadence were understood, on this view, as two faces of a single dynamic, and it was within this interpretive horizon that the revolutionary and Napoleonic generations thought about war, conquest, and the fate of states.

The canonical modern statement of that problem was Montesquieu's *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734), a work whose roots were explicitly Machiavellian and which Napoleon is known to have admired; according to the editorial tradition of the text, he carried off from the library of Sans-Souci, after the Prussian campaign, the very copy of the *Considérations* that Frederick the Great had annotated for his own use.²⁰⁷ Montesquieu's argument was that Rome had grown great through the frugality,

²⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 69.

²⁰⁷Montesquieu, *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (Amsterdam, 1734); Eng. trans. David Lowenthal, *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999 [1965]). On Napoleon's admiration for the work and its acknowledged debt to Machiavelli, see Lowenthal's introduction. The episode of the annotated Sans-Souci copy, bearing the marginalia of Frederick II and removed by Napoleon after the campaign of 1806, is recorded in the nineteenth-century editorial tradition of the *Considérations*.

discipline and virtue of a people organized for war, but that the immensity of its conquests had introduced the wealth, luxury and private ambition that dissolved the republic from within: the same expansion that made Rome also unmade it. A parallel reading, transmitted to the same generation through Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* (1776–88), reinforced the lesson that empire carried the seed of its own corruption.²⁰⁸ Behind Montesquieu, in turn, lay Machiavelli's *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, in which the Florentine had posed the founder's decisive choice: a republic must be ordered either, like Sparta and Venice, for mere preservation within narrow limits, or, like Rome, for expansion, and a republic bent on growth must arm its people, tolerate the civic *tumulti* between nobles and plebs, and incorporate the conquered, accepting the hazards of magnitude as the price of greatness.²⁰⁹

This Machiavellian model of the “republic ordered for expansion” furnishes a suggestive frame for the trajectory traced in this chapter, and bears directly on the question of whether such ideals informed Napoleonic policy. Revolutionary France had in practice enacted precisely such a model before Bonaparte inherited it: the *levée en masse*, the armed citizen-nation, and the proliferation of “sister republics” across Italy, Switzerland and the Low Countries translated the Roman logic of expansion through an armed populace into contemporary statecraft, exporting institutions even as it extended territory.²¹⁰ Bonaparte gathered this diffuse revolutionary energy into a single hand and gave it dynastic form, converting sister republics into satellite kingdoms and distributing the thrones of Europe among his relatives; yet the underlying impulse (that the regime's survival depended upon its continued expansion) remained recognizably

²⁰⁸The same preoccupation reached Napoleon's generation through Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 6 vols. (London, 1776–1788), whose narrative likewise treated imperial expansion and internal corruption as aspects of a single process.

²⁰⁹Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, I.5–6, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), esp. I.6

²¹⁰On revolutionary and Napoleonic expansion and the export of republican institutions, see Connelly, *The Wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon, 1792–1815* (cited above, n. 11); cf. Edwards, “Napoleon I: a New Augustus?”, 53–55.

the one Machiavelli had ascribed to Rome. It would be too much to claim that Napoleon consciously adopted the *Discorsi* as a blueprint for conquest, and the evidence will not bear so direct a line. But the framework reached him, mediated and transformed, through Montesquieu and through the revolutionary political culture in which he rose, and his expansionism is intelligible as the continuation, by imperial means, of a republican project of conquest whose ancient archetype was Rome.

If the expansionist part illuminates the rise, its decadent one foreshadows the fall, and here the Roman myth that Napoleon mobilized for grandeur proved double-edged. The monuments of conquest (the Vendôme Column raised deliberately higher than Trajan's, the triumphal arches, the Louvre refashioned as a *nouveau Capitole* and filled with the plunder of Italy) were, in the Montesquieuan reading, the very signs that marked the passage from virtuous expansion to the luxury and hubris that presage decline.²¹¹ More tellingly still, the regime's collapse enacted, almost to the letter, the classic fate of the over-extended polity: the Continental System and the dispersal of the *Grande Armée* across the Iberian Peninsula and the Russian steppe overstretched the empire militarily and economically, so that Napoleon, as argued above, was undone less on the battlefield than in the wider political and strategic arena. The ancient narrative he had summoned to legitimate limitless expansion thus contained, ready-made, the script of its own decadence; and the foreign policy of the Empire may be read as the unfolding of precisely the dilemma that Machiavelli had identified and Montesquieu had dramatized: that a republic ordered for growth cannot cease to grow without endangering itself, yet cannot grow indefinitely without exhausting the very virtue and resources on which growth depends.

²¹¹For the monuments and their use of *spolia*, see Rowell, *Paris: The "New Rome" of Napoleon I*, 48, 60. The overextension of the empire and the Continental System are discussed above; the diagnosis of expansion declining into decadence is the central thesis of Montesquieu's *Considérations* (n. 1).

Conclusion and Theoretical Legacy

Napoleon's rise to and use of power was complex, as was his relationship with antiquity; it was at once clear-cut and ambiguous, static and changeable and at times, simply paradoxical and unfathomable. This is indicated in Napoleon's unyielding fascination with antiquity, and yet the distinct contrast between the grandiose imperial emperor he became, and the dynamic young Republican characterized by Pascal Paoli as a figure cut from the cloth of antiquity, 'un homme de Plutarque'²¹². Napoleon's desire to surpass and over time, to recreate Rome and antiquity's great exemplars in Paris, was linked inextricably not only to the universal influence and the lure of antiquity, but also to its diverse re-appropriations during both the Revolution and the ancien régime. The imagery of antiquity enabled Napoleon and his architects to articulate their messages: the Roman world was used as the unifying language of 'the monument' and as a means of reinforcing the emperor's authority and the dawn of a new superior age. The speed and dexterity with which Napoleon manipulated both fact and his image(s) to suit the politics of the moment, also goes some way in explaining the number and mixture of prototypes he (and his publicists) chose to exploit. This suggests the manner in which both Napoleon and Augustus cleverly manipulated the past, and used to their advantage an influential body of broadcasters to disseminate their image(s).

Beyond the aspects already discussed, Napoleon's political legacy also contributed indirectly to later theoretical reflections on authority and legitimacy, particularly through the related, though not identical, concepts of Caesarism and the "myth of the savior." Caesarism refers above all to a political form. It designates a mode of authority centered on an exceptional leader, often of military origin, who rises in a moment of crisis and presents himself as the embodiment of national unity, order, and collective destiny. Modeled on the figure of Julius Caesar and reactivated in modern France through Napoleon, Caesarism implies the

²¹² Santangelo, 87.

concentration of power in a single ruler, the weakening or subordination of ordinary representative institutions, and the use of popular legitimacy to justify personal authority. It is therefore concerned with the structure and style of rule: charismatic leadership, military prestige, plebiscitary appeal, and the transformation of crisis into a durable political order.

Tulard's "myth of the savior," by contrast, refers to a historical and interpretative pattern specific to post-revolutionary France²¹³. It explains the repeated emergence of exceptional leaders after the collapse of hereditary and divine-right legitimacy in 1789. Once the monarchy could no longer provide an unquestioned foundation for political authority, moments of instability created the need for figures who could appear to rescue the nation from disorder, protect property, and reconcile revolutionary change with social stability. In this sense, the "savior" is not simply a strong ruler, but a figure produced by crisis and by the expectations of those social forces, especially the bourgeoisie, that sought order without a return to the ancien régime.

Napoleon stands at the intersection of these two concepts. He was Caesarist in the form of authority he constructed: military, personal, centralized, and invested with Roman models of command and glory. He also became the archetype of Tulard's savior because he filled the legitimacy vacuum left by the Revolution, presenting himself as the man capable of closing the revolutionary cycle while preserving its most important material gains. Thus, Caesarism names the political configuration of exceptional personal rule, whereas the "myth of the savior" names the historical logic that made such a figure necessary, desirable, and recurrent in modern French political culture.

²¹³ Tulard, Jean, and Teresa Waugh. *"Napoleon: The myth of the saviour."* (No Title) (1984).

Chapter 5: Rome and the British Empire in India: Classical Comparisons and Imperial Legitimacy, 1780–1914

Introduction

This chapter examines the uses of classical scholarship in the conceptualization of Britain's Indian empire (spanning through the period 1780–1914), as well as the influence of Britain's experiences in India for guiding and shaping classical scholarship. In particular, it is concerned with British use of the historical past in the search for imperial legitimacy, especially their past in relation to Rome. The nineteenth century witnessed a proliferation of explicit parallels drawn between the British and Roman empires, a phenomenon that has since attracted considerable scholarly attention. Classical scholarship has examined these connections with particular focus on how the study of ancient empires in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was mobilized in service of nationalist projects and imperial ambitions within Britain. Phiroze Vasunia, in his article on ‘Greater Rome and Greater Britain’, argues that the privileged place accorded to classical literature in the education of the elite in Victorian England had a profound impact on imperial thinking in the nineteenth century²¹⁴.

Classical models of empire, in particular the Roman model of empire, served as a template for the British to imagine a relationship with people of different cultures and societies. The extension of British imperial interests in the New World was of a different order involving the rule of their ‘own’ people in colonial territories. Rome provided the imperial framework to imagine the meeting of different cultures within a single political unit. Not only was it necessary to

²¹⁴ Vasunia, Phiroze. "Greater Rome and Greater Britain." *Classics and colonialism* (2005): 38-64.

forge a relation with people of different customs and traditions but there was a belief that an 'inferior' society would radically alter itself as a result of an encounter with a 'superior' civilization.

As Richard Hingley has argued, British national identity was itself premised on a prior experience of 'Romanization', one that transformed Britain while preserving a distinctly native character, thereby reinforcing a unique sense of British nationhood²¹⁵. Crucially, the British adapted this Roman model for their Indian empire by recasting it as a temporally bounded civilizing process: unlike Rome, which had no doctrine of imperial withdrawal, the British envisioned 'Anglicization' as a transformative but ultimately self-terminating project, after which India would be permitted self-governance. Hingley defines Romanization as implying 'a form of social change from one way of being to another, a change that has sometimes been conceived to have, in effective terms, a moral quality'²¹⁶, a formulation that maps closely onto British conceptions of their civilizing mission in India. His framework thus illuminates how the British looked to their own Roman past not merely as historical precedent, but as an ideological template for a new and distinctly non-settler form of colonial rule. The intellectuals in Victorian and Edwardian England, which returned obsessively to comparison between Britain and ancient Rome, were an astounding range of writers, teachers, administrators, and politicians. Not only was the comparison between Roman and British empires implicated in the development of Roman historiography; the very vision of empire articulated in these works enabled a particular form of imperialism.

First through early Victorian writers such as Charles Trevelyan and Thomas Babington Macaulay; later with Charles Dilk and John Seeley and finally through the later and most aggressive period of the empire with writers such as James Bryce, Evelyn Baring Cromer and Charles Prestwood Lucas we will discuss the

²¹⁵ Hingley, Richard. *Globalizing Roman culture: unity, diversity and empire*. Routledge, 2005, 24.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 16.

elaborate comparisons of the Roman and British empires. It is crucial to mention that they had significant investments, whether academic, financial, or political, both in ancient studies and in colonial ventures tells us much about who was authorized to speak about comparative empire. Point being these authors, which were establishment figures, were immersed in Victorian/Edwardian imperial culture, and they also had a personal stake in British imperialism. Even if many of them were not professors of Greek or Roman history, some of them were strategically situated in relation to the structures of knowledge, power, and desire that supported contemporary British academy²¹⁷.

5.1 Orientalism

Early colonial policy-makers, in the last decades of the eighteenth century, often made efforts toward recovering existing institutions of law and custom, seeking out historical precedent. An alternative ideology of British colonial rule in India proposed radical societal transformation with the introduction of English principles of law and property.²¹⁸ However, we will see that even the proposal to radically alter Indian society in order to improve it through the introduction of English principles of law, as both Macaulay and Trevelyan would advocate, is presented as having historical precedent.

While it is to a large extent undeniable that the British introduced radical changes in India, it is important to note that they simultaneously possessed a keen interest in historical precedent. This interest in the pasts of India was broad ranging from understanding the customs and laws of the land to engaging with India's deep historical past. The latter manifested itself in the patronage of Orientalist scholarship through the Asiatic Society of Bengal established in 1783. The British Orientalists, based in the colonial city of Calcutta and versed in classical scholarship, used their knowledge of ancient Greece and Rome to offer ways of

²¹⁷ Vasunia, 39

²¹⁸ Guha, R. "A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement Durham, NC: Duke Univ." (1996).

understanding the ancient past of India—often drawing parallels between the ancient and India. These comparisons allowed the British Orientalists to argue through the method of language analysis (historical philology) that both the British and Indians were at one point in the past the same. The central intellectual development was Jones's 1786 proposal of the Indo-European language family, which linked Sanskrit to Greek and Latin. This linguistic kinship was seized upon to argue that Britons and Indians shared a common ancestry, creating what Thomas Trautmann calls a "political rhetoric of love" between ruler and ruled: a way of framing colonial domination in gentler, familial terms²¹⁹.

Yet this celebration of India's antiquity was deeply ambivalent. Once a connection between Indian and European languages was established, the pressing question became: why had Indian languages and civilization "fallen behind" their European counterparts? Philology was then deployed to answer this question by treating language as an organism that develops through historical stages, a framework that conveniently allowed colonial scholars to rank Indian culture as "underdeveloped" relative to Europe, and to use that ranking to justify reforming it. In short, the same intellectual tool that positioned India as Europe's ancient kin was also turned into an instrument for asserting European superiority and legitimizing colonial intervention.

5.2 Early Victorian (1830s–1850s)

Charles Trevelyan²²⁰ (1807–1886), an ardent advocate of introducing English education in India, wrote: "The instances in which nations have worked their way to a high degree of civilization from domestic resources only are extremely rare,

²¹⁹ Trautmann, Thomas R. *Aryans and British India*. Yoda Press, 2005.

²²⁰ Moving to Calcutta in the early 1830s, he became a leading voice in the Anglicist camp of the famous Orientalist–Anglicist controversy over how Indians should be educated. The Orientalists favored state support for Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic learning; the Anglicists wanted English-language instruction in Western knowledge. Trevelyan's liberalism was genuine in its own terms: he believed in improvement, merit, free trade, the rule of law, and the universal capacity of human beings to progress. But that universalism is precisely what licensed the imperial project: if all peoples *can* be improved, then a benevolent ruling power has a *duty* to improve them, by tutelage and if necessary by despotism, until they are "ready." In few words, he supported the "Civilizing mission" through liberal imperialism.

compared with those in which the impulse has been communicated from without, and has been supported by the extensive study and imitation of the literature of foreign countries”²²¹. He went on to argue that the Romans only reached their degree of high civilization from imitating the Greeks. The expansion of the Roman Empire in Europe and North Africa produced even greater results, proclaims Trevelyan, because the Roman language and literature ‘sank so deep into the language and habits of the people, that Latin to this day forms the basis of the tongues of France and southern Europe, and the Roman law the basis of their jurisprudence’²²². Trevelyan believed that Indians could potentially reach the heights of civilization just as the benefactors of the Roman Empire once did. He was quick to point out that they were not unique for requiring such a process. The British themselves once stood in the same position in relation to the Romans. For Trevelyan, imperial Rome became the filter through which an imperial Britain could be legitimately imagined in relation to their new territories in the Indian subcontinent²²³.

He also believed that the process of acculturation indeed required the forgetting of the original violence that established territorial empire on the Indian subcontinent. Unlike Seeley later on in the nineteenth century, Trevelyan acknowledged that Britain's Indian empire was indeed built on conquest. While it was fine to acknowledge the initial violent upheaval that empire required in establishing itself, Trevelyan was quick to point out the ultimate benefits of imperial rule through example: that the Indians could potentially reach the heights

²²¹ Trevelyan, Charles Edward. *On the Education of the People of India*. Gale and the British Library, 1838, 36.

²²² *Ibid.*, 39.

²²³ In his treatise advocating a new educational policy in India, Trevelyan wrote: “The Romans at once civilized the nations of Europe, and attached them to their rule by Romanizing them; or, in other words, by educating them in the Roman literature and arts, and teaching them to emulate their conquerors instead of opposing them. Acquisitions made by superiority in war, were consolidated by superiority in the arts of peace; and the remembrance of the original violence was lost in that of the benefits which resulted from it. The provincials of Italy, Spain, Africa, and Gaul, having no ambition except to imitate the Romans, and to share their privileges with them, remained to the last faithful subjects of the empire; and the union was at last dissolved, not by internal revolt, but by the shock of external violence, which involved conquerors and conquered in one common overthrow. The Indians will, I hope, soon stand in the same position towards us in which we once stood towards the Romans”. See Trevelyan, 196-197.

of civilization such as the British now possess. What is interesting to note is that imitation was upheld as the means by which Indians could benefit from an encounter with the British.

T. B. Macaulay (1800-1859) suggested that it was by example and imitation that Indians could benefit from the imperial experience. Macaulay turned his gaze back into the past to when the British themselves were imitating and learning from the Romans. “Had our ancestors...neglected the language of Cicero and Tacitus; had they confined their attention to the old dialects of our own island; had they printed nothing and taught nothing at the universities but Chronicles in Anglo-Saxon and Romances in Norman-French, would England have been what she now is?”²²⁴ Trevelyan and Macaulay ultimately believed that the British surpassed the Romans. Both of them asserted confidently that the literature of England was ultimately much more valuable than the literature of classical antiquity. While Macaulay put forward an argument for the education of Indians, Trevelyan laid out a plan for the process of ‘Anglicization’ in India. For Trevelyan, it was this process (a process with historical roots in imperial Rome) that would be foundational for an enduring relationship to be forged between Britain and India.

One fascinating aspect of the discussion on languages in the first half of the nineteenth century in India was the appropriation of the Roman imperial model of acculturation and the transmission of knowledge. Because the Indian vernacular languages were seen to be ‘unformed’ tongues, Anglicists (those who advocated English education in colonial India) offered programs to reform these ‘unfortunate’ languages and bring them up to the present. Trevelyan outlined the path of diffusion that less-developed languages would follow when encountering their developed counterparts, the advanced languages of Western civilization (following the example set by the Roman Empire). It was Trevelyan's belief that English

²²⁴ Macaulay, Thomas Babington Macaulay. *Critical and Historical Essays, Contributed to the Edinburgh Review*. 1852.

achieved this new status, of a language possessing more superior knowledge capable of replacing the language of ‘old traditional knowledge’, i.e. Sanskrit.

Anglicists were convinced that the English language had attained perfection and that its long glorious history was reflected in the complexity of the language and its extensive literature. For Trevelyan and Macaulay, the perfection of a language reflected the achievement of a culture. Linda Dowling has argued that Romantic philology in the nineteenth century (a new ideology linking language, literature, and nation together) was a response to eighteenth-century materialist theories of language²²⁵. In contrast with the latter, Romanticism firmly placed language within culture rather than allowing it an autonomous existence. Hence, language came to be viewed as the outward expression of the inner essence of a nation²²⁶. If language was seen that way, then naturally, if the nation's history was at its civilizational peak, that particular national history/ language could be extended (or in other words universalized). The relationship between language and culture in Romanticism facilitated the formation of an imperial vision of English that could then be transported to different parts of the world. Language was tied, first, to national destiny and then was projected onto the world, a world connected by the political and cultural framework of empire. In this way, philology became an evocative tool of British imperial hegemony in negotiating Britain's relationship to the colonies.

Reflecting on a new configuration of empire that was coalescing in late eighteenth-century India, Macaulay asked: “But what constitution can we give to our Indian Empire which shall not be anomalous?”²²⁷ Macaulay knew exactly

²²⁵ Dowling, Linda C. *Language and decadence in the Victorian fin de siècle*. Princeton University Press, 2014.

²²⁶ Trautmann; 129, 131-132.

²²⁷ Continues: “... That Empire is itself the strangest of all political anomalies. That a handful of adventurers from an island in the Atlantic should have subjugated a vast country divided from the place of their birth by half the globe—a country which at no very distant period was merely the subject of fable to the nations of Europe—a country never before violated by the most renowned of Western Conquerors—a country which Trajan never entered—a country lying beyond the point where the phalanx of Alexander refused to proceed;—that we should govern a territory 10,000 miles from us—a territory larger and more populous than France, Spain, Italy, and Germany put together—a territory the present clear revenue of any state in the world, France excepted—a territory, inhabited by men, differing from us in race, color, language,

where and at what point in the past to interrogate. Classical references abound in his writings. While he may have viewed Roman literary endeavors as derivative of the Greek, he nevertheless found Romans to be valiant imperial conquerors; if not to be emulated then at least to be revered²²⁸. For Macaulay, the British were the true inheritors of imperial Romans. However, he was also one of the first to recognize the uniqueness of Britain's Indian empire. By the 1830s, Macaulay clearly felt that the triumphs of imperial Britain surpassed those of the classical empires including Rome. Britain exceeded Alexander's achievements in bringing India under its rule and Britain surpassed imperial Rome in the geographical extent of its empire.

The early nineteenth century saw the consolidation of a new ideology of rule in British India. There was a turn to a liberal empire in which colonial subjects became legitimate targets of reform. The liberal project of empire was premised not upon violent conquest of a nation but rather a kind of willful submission of colonial peoples to imperial rule for their own improvement and path to eventual freedom. Uday Mehta argues persuasively that a liberal ideology of imperial rule emerges as the reigning doctrine in the early part of the nineteenth century, what Mehta calls liberal imperialism which in the nineteenth century was both paternal and progressive in its view of itself in India²²⁹. The way in which the liberal/moral project gets articulated, however, is through a historical argument, that the English were destined to lead India. Mehta argues that in the nineteenth century nearly every liberal justification of empire was anchored in the ideology of progress with an eye towards the realization of a future. Imperial ideology then shifted in the second half of the nineteenth century, embracing the idea that native cultures and

manners, morals, religion;— these are prodigies to which the world has seen nothing similar. Reason is confounded. We interrogate the past in vain. See Maculay, 20-21.

²²⁸ Edwards, Catharine. "Translating Empire? Macaulay's Rome." *Roman Presences: Receptions of Rome in European Culture, 1789–1945* (1999): 70-87.

²²⁹ Mehta, Uday Singh. *Liberalism and empire: A study in nineteenth-century British liberal thought*. University of Chicago Press, 2018.

colonial subjects are intransigent, and an emphasis on colonial reform gave way to the management of cultural intransigence²³⁰.

5.3 Mid-Late Victorian Period (1860s–1880s)

Writers such as Charles Wentworth Dilke²³¹ (1843-1911) and John Seeley (1834–1895) wrote influential books that not only shaped the concerns of the comparisons between Rome and Britain or that they prefigure the very issues that were taken up by later writers; they also inform them through their political idiom, their conceptual repertoire, and their ideological apparatus. Dilke introduced the influential concept of “Greater Britain”, in his book “Greater Britain: A record of Travel in English-Speaking Countries during 1866 and 1867”, published in 1868. In this work he describes his travels as he followed England around the world through places such as United States, Australia, and India. One of the topics Dilke reflects on is whiteness and his anxieties about race. He remarks that he found the white British to hold the same basic values and traits even when living in different continents: “If I remarked that climate, soil, manners of life, that mixture with other peoples had modified the blood, I saw too, that in essentials the race was always one²³²”. He further elaborates that the collective culture of the white British peoples, whether in Britain or abroad, forms something that he refers to as Saxondom, which must be upheld and defended everywhere. He states that “The result of our survey, is such as to give us reason for the belief that race distinctions will long continue, that miscegenation will go but little towards blending races ...

²³⁰ Bell, Duncan. "From ancient to modern in Victorian imperial thought." *The Historical Journal* 49.3 (2006): 735-759.

²³¹ Politically Dilke sat on the radical wing of the Liberal Party: republican-leaning in his youth (he had to walk back open republican sympathies after they nearly sank his career when criticism of monarchy was politically toxic), a supporter of extending the franchise, free trade, and reform of local government. His imperial federation idea was grounded in the fact that Britain, the United States, Australia, and other Anglo-Saxon settler societies formed a single expanding racial-political community bound by language, law, and "Anglo-Saxon" character, regardless of formal sovereignty. He's liberal imperialism of a slightly different flavor than Trevelyan's: less about civilizing "backward" peoples and more about celebrating the global diffusion of a supposedly superior Anglo-Saxon political culture, with race doing a lot of the work that "civilization" did for the Macaulay generation.

²³² Dilke, Charles Wentworth. *Greater Britain: A record of travel in English-speaking countries during 1866 and 1867*. Cosimo, Inc., 2005, vii.

and Saxondom will rise triumphant from doubtful struggle²³³". The British Empire, which is "four and half times as large as the Roman Empire at its greatest extent", provides the opportunity to the English "of planting free institutions among dark-skinned institutions of the world²³⁴".

This responsibility cannot be shirked, because 'the power of English laws and English principles of government is not merely an English question; its continuation is essential to the freedom of mankind', much as Rome had spread its own administrative and legal structures. Dilke's work was unabashedly an eulogy to Saxondom and a warning to white Britishers to take up arms against the darker forces of barbarism and chaos. Rule over India gave special encouragement to the Victorians to think of their own empire as an entity worthy of comparison to other empires, and it is Dilke's discussion of India that takes up a substantial part of the book. Dilke suggests that India should eventually be ruled by its own people, but since the natives are not yet ready for such rule or for such democracy, the British must govern them until then. It is their responsibility to teach the natives the English language and to rule the country as wisely and justly as possible. Dilke cannot deny the British behavior in India is often despotic and anti-democratic. However, like the Romans governing "barbaric" provinces, Dilke suggested that the people of India were not yet ready for democracy because they were "slaves to caste and prejudice" and "submissive by nature". He famously remarked that while the people in England were "too democratic for the Government," the British government in India was "too democratic for the people".²³⁵ By that remark, Dilke means that the natives in India do not fully understand British institutions and laws or appreciate the benevolence of British justice.

One could argue that Dilke, as not much directly comparing Roman Empire with the British one, paved the way for subsequent writers that did that comparison extensively. Fifteen years after the publication of Dilke's book, and

²³³ Ibid., 572.

²³⁴ Ibid., 573.

²³⁵ Dilke, *Greater Britain*. The observation belongs to Dilke's discussion of British government in India.

just after the fierce debates about empire and imperialism that took place, John Robert Seeley (1834-1895) gave discussion of the British Empire a historical basis. Seeley's background was in classics, and he was a professor of Latin before he became a professor of modern history²³⁶. Greek and Latin were almost indispensable for the successful entry into the ICS²³⁷. Even the non-language entrance examinations required knowledge of the ancient world, often in conjunction with the history of the modern Empire²³⁸.

For Seeley, race poses as much of a problem as it did for Dilke before him, and he is unable to give his reader a definition of Greater Britain without further qualifying his remarks in one form or another to allow for the situation in India. Seeley argues that the British Empire is the sole survivor of a whole series of empires that emerged during the discovery of the New World, empires such as Greater Holland, Greater Portugal, Greater Spain, and Greater France that have since gone into grave decline. Greater Britain has avoided the missteps and dangers that plagued the other empires, he writes, but it has not avoided them altogether, so the challenge for it in the present is to follow a route different from those taken by failed great powers. According to Seeley²³⁹ the political anomaly of Britain's Indian empire was that it did not resemble the colonies which classical students met with in Greek and Roman history. Rather he added that "our Empire is not an Empire at all in the ordinary sense of the word. It does not consist of a congeries of nations held together by force, but in the main of one nation, as much as if it

²³⁶Seeley was elected a lecturer in classics at Cambridge in 1858, served as a teacher of classics at the City of London School for two years from 1861, and was then Professor of Latin at University College London until 1869, when he returned to Cambridge as Regius Professor of Modern History. The Expansion of England was first given as a series of lectures at Cambridge in 1881 and 1882, of which the lectures pertaining to India were intended for candidates aiming for the Indian Civil Service. He treated the Indian project as a different kind of empire altogether, won by conquest and held by force, not by settlement and shared nationality, and he was less sentimental than some about claiming a civilizing mandate there. See Vasunia, 39

²³⁷ Majeed, Javed. "Comparativism and references to Rome in British imperial attitudes to India." *Roman Presences: Receptions of Rome in European Culture, 1789-1945* (1999): 88-109.

²³⁸ One of the sample questions was: "What lessons with regard to the principles which should be observed in the government of British India may be learned from the history of the Roman dominions under the Republic and the Empire?". Regulations and Examinations for Open Competition for the Civil Service of India, question from 1893, quoted in Collini, Winch, and Burrow 1983: 356.

were no Empire but an ordinary state.²⁴⁰” For Seeley, India was never an ethnological unity or a nation and never would be in his eyes. What is apparent here is the strong reluctance to take on the mantle of empire. India may pose a threat to the long-term stability and prosperity of the British Empire. Nevertheless, even the ‘Oriental Empire’, as he puts it, “is not an Empire attached to England in the same way as the Roman Empire was attached to Rome; it will not drag us down, or infect us at home with Oriental notions or methods of Government”²⁴¹. In general, Seeley is disinclined to accept the possibility of decay in the future of Greater Britain and argues that even the special case of India does not present any danger to the empire. Seeley at times even equates the two empires and claims that the British Empire holds the same historical importance as the Roman. He notes that in the generation before his, the Roman Empire was not considered worthy of study because writers supposed that liberty did not exist in the Empire, whereas the Republic was held up for scrutiny as an example of a free state. However, now Victorians study civilizations even if they did not preserve liberty because the British have learned “that there are many other good things in politics besides liberty; for instance, there is nationality, there is civilization²⁴²”. Moreover, although ‘the incubus of the Empire’ crushed liberty in Rome, the British Empire is far enough from India, and the metropolis is so little affected by the colonial situation that Britain and British values are not going to be destroyed by empire in the same way as Rome²⁴³.

Even if some argue that it was a sort of despotism, the Roman Empire is held to be worthy of study, Seeley writes, because the conquerors were demonstrably superior to the conquered in respect to their civilization. The civilizing effects of the Roman Empire on Europe are remarkable, and the civilizing phenomenon that was the Roman Empire is one of the most

²⁴⁰ Seeley, John Robert. *The expansion of England: two courses of lectures*. MacMillan and Company, limited, 1909, 39-40.

²⁴¹ Seeley, 304.

²⁴² Ibid., 238.

²⁴³ Ibid., 245.

consequential features of European history. It goes without saying that, for Seeley, British rule in India is of the Roman type in so far as it also involves the rule by the superior over the inferior races. The British have brought the English language, law, peace, and order to India, and so, just as Rome was a beacon to the less advanced peoples of Gaul and Iberia, Britain brings a light to the tropics: “It is not a glorious light shining in darkness, but a somewhat cold daylight introduced into the midst of a warm gorgeous twilight²⁴⁴”.

However, by the time Seeley was writing, the project of empire in India had considerably shifted from the days of Macaulay. The later Victorian thinkers such as Seeley were in a sense trying to undo what the earlier imperial policy-makers in India attempted to set in place, a “liberal” project of empire as we might call it which involved a notion of either transforming the Indian himself to produce a liberal subject or radically transforming Indian society on utilitarian principles of rationality. Seeley in countering British Orientalist claims that both the British and Indians are part of a common history disputed whether there was indeed any natural tie that bound the people of India and Britain together²⁴⁵. While in the early decades of the nineteenth century the Orientalist discoveries of the linguistic and cultural links between Europeans and Indians may have been more prominent in the minds of those British administrators formulating policies for India, in the latter part of the century those philological and racial fantasies of a common humanity gave way to the separate historical trajectories of the two races. Seeley declared that the “language of the prevalent race of India is indeed of the same family as our own language. But in every other respect there is extreme alienation. Their traditions do not touch ours at any point.²⁴⁶” Seeley in fact not only refutes the question of a commonality of culture with India, but he also returns to the theme of classical models of colonization and empire. Dilke and Seeley were two of the most influential writers of the phase of empire sometimes referred to as mid-

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 244.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 148.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 147.

Victorian imperialism, and Seeley is considered by some scholars to be the founder of modern imperial studies. The comparisons were written retrospectively to re-authenticate the points that were made by figures such as Dilke and Seeley who were writing when Britain was entering its most aggressive period of imperialist expansion.

5.4 Late Victorian and Edwardian Period (1880s–1914)

The imperialist and racialized idea of Greater Britain, propagated by figures such as Dilke and Seeley, opened up a space in which the comparisons could take shape and flourish. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the concept of a Greater Britain had moved closer to the center of national debate as a response to political and imperial pressures. By the time of Victoria's coronation as Empress of India, in 1876, the concept of Greater Britain was directly feeding into the imperialism that "had become by general consensus a common policy in the British establishment, and the overall guiding strategy of British foreign policy²⁴⁷". What the phenomenon suggests is that the Empire enabled the conditions in which the detailed comparisons between Rome and Britain were able to emerge, and, at the same time, these very comparisons also assisted British imperial interests. We might put this in other terms and say that comparisons between Rome and Britain accommodated and validated the idea of a Greater Britain, and simultaneously the British Empire offered the ideological framework within which a particular interpretation of the relationship between Rome and Britain might gain currency.

The three most sustained and elaborate comparisons of Rome and Britain during the Late Victorian and Edwardian period are James Bryce²⁴⁸, *The Roman*

²⁴⁷ Vasunia, 60.

²⁴⁸ James Bryce, 1st Viscount Bryce (1838–1922), was a distinguished jurist, historian, and statesman whose career spanned academia, politics, and diplomacy. After a brilliant classical education at Oxford, he served as Regius Professor of Civil Law there from 1870 to 1893. He entered politics as a Liberal MP and served in Gladstone's cabinet, holding the position of Chief Secretary for Ireland briefly in 1905–06. His scholarly reputation rested on several influential works, most notably *The Holy Roman Empire* (1864), based on his prize-winning Oxford essay, and *The American Commonwealth* (1888), a highly regarded study of American political institutions that partly earned him the appointment as British Ambassador to the United States (1907–13). His comparative essays on the Roman and British empires were republished

Empire and the British Empire in India and The Extension of Roman and English Law throughout the World, in Studies in History and Jurisprudence (1901)²⁴⁹; the Earl of Cromer²⁵⁰ (Evelyn Baring), *Ancient and Modern Imperialism* (1910)²⁵¹; and Charles Lucas²⁵², *Greater Rome and Greater Britain* (1912)²⁵³. Bryce, Cromer, and Lucas reflect the views advocated by many among the Victorian elite after 1870 or so. Britain had embarked on an ambitious policy of imperialist expansion in this period, which lasted until about 1914, and the word ‘imperialism’ itself came to acquire a positive connotation that it did not have earlier, when it was associated pejoratively with the Napoleons in the continent²⁵⁴.

These three writers, like many other Victorian imperialists, were involved with classics and government service at some point or another in their careers. In this respect, the connection of figures such as Bryce and Lucas to the Oxbridge colleges, in general, and to Oxford classics, in particular, is a point worth noting²⁵⁵.

in 1914 as reading material for Indian Civil Service candidates, reflecting the centrality of classical models to British imperial thought.

²⁴⁹ Bryce, James. *The Ancient Roman Empire and the British Empire in India: The Diffusion of Roman and English Law Throughout the World: Two Historical Studies*. BRILL, 2025.

²⁵⁰ Evelyn Baring, 1st Earl of Cromer (1841–1917), pursued a career at the centre of British imperial administration. After military training and early postings abroad, he served as British Controller-General in Egypt (1879–80) and then as Finance Minister in India (1880–83). His most consequential role was as British Agent and Consul-General in Egypt (1883–1907), where he exercised near-total authority over Egyptian governance and finances despite the country's nominal independence, earning him the informal title "Lord Cromwell." After retiring from Egypt, he remained prominent in public life, publishing *Modern Egypt* (1908) and *Ancient and Modern Imperialism* (1910), and sitting in the House of Lords.

²⁵¹ Cromer, Evelyn Baring. "Ancient and modern imperialism." (*No Title*) (1910).

²⁵² Sir Charles Prestwood Lucas (1853–1931) was a colonial administrator and imperial historian. After a distinguished classical education at Oxford, where he took a double first and won the Chancellor's Latin essay prize, he placed first in the civil service examinations of 1877 and joined the Colonial Office, eventually rising to Head of the Dominions Division. Alongside his administrative career he was a prolific scholar of empire, producing works including his multi-volume *Historical Geography of the British Colonies and Greater Rome and Greater Britain* (1912), in which he drew explicit comparisons between Roman and British imperial experience. He retired from the Colonial Office and ended his career as a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford.

²⁵³ Lucas, Charles Prestwood. *Greater Rome and Greater Britain*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

²⁵⁴ The early standard-bearer for the so-called new imperialism was Benjamin Disraeli, who famously signaled the importance that he was giving to an imperialist foreign policy in his Crystal Palace speech of 1872, and who was instrumental in the coronation of Victoria as Empress of India. Disraeli's dramatic insistence on British supremacy and hegemony overseas had attracted a fair share of powerful defenders, even if they were not always in agreement with Disraeli or with each other. Thus, the three comparisons with Rome discussed below, which begin to appear in print roughly at the point of the empire's greatest territorial size, belong very firmly to the chauvinist climate that Disraeli went to great lengths to foster in late Victorian England.

²⁵⁵ Similarly to the Seeley's case mentioned above, During the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, many of the men who administered the British Empire in London and overseas were trained in classics at

Thus, the elite educational establishments, the study of Greek and Roman antiquity, and British imperialism intersect with important consequences in the period. With their intellectual and biographical background in mind²⁵⁶ it should perhaps not be expected that the comparative works of Bryce, Cromer, and Lucas differ radically in details or conclusions concerning empire, and, in fact, their books conform to one program, that of legitimating the British Empire and so ensuring its preservation. What is notable is that these books are unreflective restatements of an orthodoxy rather than more innovative explorations of Roman history. They delineate a platform that ultimately serves to justify British imperialism.

The points made by Bryce, Cromer, and Lucas that follow in the tradition of mid-late Victorian imperialism can be seen as somewhat of an extension of Dilke's and Seeley's topics, including race and nationhood. The British Empire involves the rule of superior white peoples over inferior dark races. All three writers agree that the question of race and color is vital to the study of the British Empire. Bryce and Cromer argue that the Romans were able to achieve a fusion of the races and were correspondingly expert at assimilation, while Lucas claims that the Roman Empire avoided the problem of color since it did not bring together people of different colors. However, in the modern period, all three writers state that antipathy based on color is an undeniable and prominent feature of civilized life. 'Now to the Teutonic peoples,' Bryce remarks, 'and especially to the English and Anglo-Americans, the difference of color means a great deal. It creates a feeling of separation, perhaps even of a slight repulsion'²⁵⁷.

Oxford. In the years from 1888 to 1905, for instance, three successive viceroys of India came from Balliol College alone. Like many others, James Leigh Strachan-Davidson, the Master of Balliol and author of *Problems of Roman Criminal Law* (1913), campaigned hard to send his students into the Indian Civil Service and to keep Greek and Latin as central subjects in the entrance examinations. 'I have fought for the Civil Service at Oxford for the last thirty years,' he said to the Royal Commission in 1913. See Vasunia, 61.

²⁵⁶ See short biographies at the end of the chapter.

²⁵⁷ Bryce, 54.

The darker races are incapable of ruling themselves and must therefore be ruled by Britons. The ancient Romans in their provinces were in some respects more corrupt than the British are in theirs, according to Bryce, Cromer, and Lucas, but the Romans nevertheless managed to rule over other peoples and brought civilization and peace to them. The Gaulish druids would have continued to practice human sacrifice, for instance, and it was only Roman law and resolve that squashed the custom. Similarly, the natives of places such as India are, with some exceptions, backward and stuck in the past, members of an inferior civilization, observers of barbaric practices such as *sati* (which is comparable to the druids' rites), susceptible to bribery and corruption, and are therefore not able to govern themselves.

Such rule entails the maintenance of despotism overseas and a democracy at home. "The government of India by the English resembles that of her provinces by Rome in being thoroughly despotic."²⁵⁸ The despotism of Rome during the Empire is not in doubt, the writers state, but the despotism of the British in their Empire is justified and benevolent, and milder than the Roman. Moreover, where Rome was ruled by an emperor even within Rome itself, Britain maintains this despotism while it governs its own country on democratic principles. But this discrepancy in the British Empire is unavoidable, since democracy is well established in Britain whereas it is completely alien to India, the Indians themselves are unfit for democratic institutions, and, in addition, democracy is not even desired by many Indians other than those educated in European values and ideas.

By this reasoning, it may be said that while the Roman Empire was uniformly despotic and undivided²⁵⁹, the British Empire has actively fostered

²⁵⁸ Bryce, 25.

²⁵⁹ Here, as throughout these comparisons, the "Roman Empire" denotes the imperial system established after 27 BC, when, following the final civil wars, Caesar's adopted heir Octavian (later Augustus) emerged as sole ruler. It should be stressed that Roman imperial expansion was substantially the achievement of the Republic; the characterization of Rome as 'uniformly despotic' therefore applies to the Principate rather than to the republican phase of Roman imperialism: a distinction that the Victorian comparison,

liberty in some of its far-flung provinces and given natives some say in local government in others; and that the larger it has become, the more liberty there is to be found in it. According to Bryce, the Roman Empire died through violence and internal causes such as inefficiency, corruption, lack of manpower, and a general decline of physical and intellectual vitality, but Britain is not suffering from the same weaknesses at the moment, and so it is not subject to the same dangers as Rome was. The one thing that Britain should be wary of is the natives' reuniting and threatening to drive out the British, though this too is not likely to happen in the near future²⁶⁰.

The anxiety about the decline of empire, then, takes various forms in Bryce, Cromer, and Lucas. Against these legitimating views of empire, it is a matter of pivotal significance to recall that not all those who invoked ancient Rome did so solely or largely for the purpose of supporting British rule overseas. None of these critics offered comparative evaluations of Rome and Britain on the same scale as Bryce, Cromer, and Lucas, but they did contradict or repudiate the claims made by strong-minded imperialists. What this phenomenon suggests is that in this period Rome appealed most, and most extensively, to those who justified the British Empire rather than to those who fought against its excesses or wished to end it altogether. One might have explained this by the fact that most of the men who ruled the British Empire in London and overseas, from 1870 to 1914, were trained in classics.

5.5 Alternative Models and Critics

Not everyone who invoked ancient Rome did so in order to defend the Empire. Set against the legitimating comparisons of Bryce, Cromer, and Lucas was a quieter counter-tradition, which the remainder of this section traces in two movements: first, the British liberals and radicals who preferred the Greek model of colonial

preoccupied with the imperial analogy, tended to elide. As Seeley himself noted, an earlier generation of scholars had held up the free Republic, rather than the Empire, as the object worthy of study.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 68.

autonomy to the Roman model of dominion; and, more strikingly, the Indian intellectuals who took up the Roman analogy on their own terms and turned it against the charge of civilizational inferiority that the comparison was meant to license. The British critics may be considered first. For instance, Gilbert Murray, the Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, also opposed aggressive imperialism and took the Liberal view on empire²⁶¹. In this connection, however, it can be suggested that the Greek example of democracy and of colonial autonomy proved more attractive than the Roman Empire to critics and opponents of the new imperialism. In a book entitled *Greater Greece and Greater Britain* (1886), for example, Edward Freeman criticized Seeley's notion of the Anglo-Saxon imperial federation and argued that the Greek model meant real autonomy for the colonies. In this scenario, the 'true Expander of England' was none other than George Washington²⁶².

Another critic of the new imperialism was Disraeli's prime ministerial rival, William Gladstone, who always opposed British imperialist expansion even when he was unable to prevent it. Gladstone supported the notion of an Anglo-Saxon empire based on the Greek model of mother-city and colony, but he also believed that Britain, having already conquered India, ought to remain in it for moral and civilizing reasons. As early as 1855, he declared that the British had much to learn from the Greek model of colonization, for 'no country known to us appears so fully to have realized or to have given such remarkable effect to that idea²⁶³'. By the time of his essay 'England's Mission' of 1878, he is quoting Horace and attacking Disraeli for entering London as if he were a general in a Roman triumph. In the same essay, he denies the inferiority of the Indian mind or

²⁶¹ Wilson, Duncan. *Gilbert Murray OM, 1866–1957*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987.

²⁶² Freeman, Edward Augustus. *Greater Greece and Greater Britain: And, George Washington, the Expander of England*. London, Macmillan, 1886.

²⁶³ The quote originates from Gladstone's address titled "Our Colonies", delivered on 12 November 1855 to the members of the Mechanics' Institute in Chester. It was originally published by John W. Parker and Son, London, 1855. In this speech, Gladstone extensively praised the Greek model of colonization, the relationship between mother-city (*metropolis*) and colony, as the ideal template for the British Empire, arguing that no civilization in history had realized this idea as effectively as ancient Greece.

of India's civilization and compares Britain's rule over India to Rome's rule over Greece; but he also adds that Britain's current policy toward India needs to be re-examined and to be brought more into line with Britain's own economic, moral, and political interests. For a politician such as Gladstone, then, ancient Rome can be used to restrain the extreme imperialism of the Conservative Party and to oppose expansion.

Hobson (1858-1940) mounted one of the first combined economic and ethical British critiques of imperialism in his study, *Imperialism* (1902)²⁶⁴, which influenced many anti-imperialists, including Lenin.²⁶⁵ Hobson found the Roman Empire to be analogous to the British Empire, but turned this into a reason to disband the British imperialist system: 'This is the largest, plainest instance history presents of the social parasitic process by which a moneyed interest within the State, usurping the reins of government, makes for imperial expansion in order to fasten economic suckers into foreign bodies so as to drain them of their wealth in order to support domestic luxury,' he wrote in the last chapter of his book. 'The new Imperialism differs in no vital point from this old example.'²⁶⁶ Hobson's book was first published in 1902, but his earlier writings were also used by other opponents of empire.

Not least among these critics were three men educated in classics at Oxford, namely Gilbert Murray, Francis W. Hirst, and John L. Hammond, who jointly wrote the book *Liberalism and the Empire* (1900)²⁶⁷. This fiercely anti-imperialist work takes as its point of departure a word of caution from Thucydides, and adduces Roman slavery as a reason not to practice imperialism. In a glance back at Dilke and Seeley, moreover, the writers argue that "the greatness of Greater Britain' is not compatible with despotism, militarism, and financial

²⁶⁴ Hobson, John Atkinson. *Imperialism: A study*. Routledge, 2018.

²⁶⁵ Including Lenin, who wrote: "Rome, founded on slavery, pursued a colonial policy and achieved imperialism. But "general" arguments about imperialism, which ignore or put into the background the fundamental difference of social-economic systems, inevitably degenerate into absolutely empty banalities or into grandiloquent comparisons like Greater Rome and Greater Britain"

²⁶⁶ Hobson, 367.

²⁶⁷ Hirst, Francis Wrigley, et al. *Liberalism and the empire: three essays*. London: RB Johnson, 1900.

exploitation²⁶⁸”. While Bryce, Cromer, and Lucas were restating claims based on ancient and modern evidence to hold on to the British Empire, then, writers such as Hobson and Murray, themselves informed about the ancient world, were preparing at the very same time detailed reasons to dissolve the Empire.

The most telling responses to the Roman comparison, however, came not from within Britain but from the colonized themselves. Indian intellectuals were keenly aware of the privileged status that the classical empires enjoyed in British culture, and rather than acquiescing in the lesson it was meant to teach (that India belonged to a lower stage of civilization) they engaged the comparison directly, contesting or qualifying it on their own terms. No British critic of empire could match M.K. Gandhi in successful opposition to British rule in India, and Gandhi intervenes in this debate in a manner consistent with his political philosophy in general. By this time, he had read Justinian in Latin, while studying in the Inns of Court in London, and also come to an appreciation of Plato’s *Apology*. In *Hind Swaraj* (*‘Indian Home Rule’*)²⁶⁹ of 1909, which is written in the manner of a Platonic dialogue, he explains what civilization is and so, indirectly, responds to the British accusation that India is at a lower level of civilization than the British:

“I believe that the civilization India has evolved is not to be beaten in the world. Nothing can equal the seeds sown by our ancestors. Rome went, Greece shared the same fate, the might of the Pharaohs was broken, Japan has become westernized, of China nothing can be said, but India is still, somehow or other, sound at the foundation. The people of Europe learn their lessons from the writings of the men of Greece or Rome, which exist no longer in their former glory. In trying to learn from them, the Europeans imagine that they will avoid the mistakes of Greece and Rome. Such is their pitiable condition. In the midst of all this, India remains immovable, and that is her glory.”²⁷⁰

²⁶⁸ Ibid., xvi.

²⁶⁹ Gandhi, Mahatma. *Indian home rule*. Ganesh & Company, 1922.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 66.

In its excess of national self-pride, the passage is typical of Gandhi's life and work. But here the author also brings in the issue of decay, and turns it against other civilizations of Europe, Africa, and Asia. India's immobility contrasts with the quality of other cultures, which by reason of their very pliancy are either fallen or in a deplorable condition.

Another Indian writer, Bhudev Mukhopadhyay (1827-94), who wrote textbooks in Bengali on the histories of Greece and Rome, had adopted a more sympathetic attitude to the British. He believed that the British rule of India could be understood better through historical comparison with other empires such as the Roman. But even though he predicted a long rule without imperial decline for the British in India, Bhudev was ultimately quite confident, on the basis of his wide studies, about the superiority of Hindu, and especially Brahmin, values and customs²⁷¹. In different ways, thus, Bhudev and Gandhi indicate that the subjects of British rule in India understood the special status enjoyed by the classical civilizations in British culture but were themselves not therefore ready to acknowledge the superiority of the imperial culture.

Conclusion

Rome functioned as a figure, a figure of empire and for empire, and it lent itself to use by those who wished to transfer imperium to themselves and who claimed the authority to speak for empire in their own time. Of course, *translatio imperii* was just what lay at the heart of the comparison between the Roman and British empires, and was its driving engine in many respects. Surely, one of the points of the comparisons was that the 'authentic' imperial experience of the ancient Romans was now available to British administrators, intellectuals, and politicians. Among other reasons, the sheer extent and territorial scale of their multiethnic, multiracial world empire, which was far larger than the Belgian, French, and

²⁷¹ Vasunia, 55-56.

Spanish empires, caused British imperialists to turn for comparison to the Roman polity rather than, say, the Assyrian, Persian, Athenian, or Macedonian empires. These latter empires were brought up by writers for discussion on occasion, but the comparisons were generally brief or made in passing. Robert Young notes that “the great original of empire in the nineteenth century was always the Roman, which enabled people to identify with a concept of the benign spread of civilization over benighted barbarian tribes²⁷².”

²⁷² Young, Robert JC. *Postcolonialism: An historical introduction*. John Wiley & Sons, 2016, 33.

Chapter 6: Fascism and Nazism: Rome as Total Political Myth

Introduction

Among the political religions of the twentieth century, none drew more insistently on the legacy of antiquity than the totalitarian regimes of Fascist Italy and National Socialist Germany. Totalitarianism, as a form of political rule, sought to refound society on a new foundation of myth, race, and historical destiny, and in this project the memory of the Roman Empire occupied an unusually central place. Where liberal and democratic political cultures tended to treat Rome as one classical reference among many, the totalitarian movements of the interwar period invested it with a totalizing significance: Rome became a myth to be lived, an image of unity, hierarchy, and imperial grandeur against which the fragmentation, pluralism, and decadence of the present could be measured and condemned. The appeal to Rome thus performed a function that exceeded ordinary historical analogy. It supplied totalitarian ideology with a vocabulary of legitimacy, a repertoire of symbols, and a teleology in which the regime presented itself as the long-awaited heir, or even the reincarnation, of a lost imperial order.²⁷³

This affinity between totalitarian rule and the Roman past has long attracted the attention of historians of fascism, who have noted that the appropriation of antiquity was rarely incidental or merely decorative. Scholars working in the tradition of Emilio Gentile and George Mosse have argued that fascism and National Socialism functioned as political religions, movements that demanded total adherence and that constructed an entire liturgy of myths, rites,

²⁷³ On fascism and National Socialism as political religions that bound the individual to the collective through myth, rite, and symbol, see Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, trans. Keith Botsford (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); and George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1975).

and symbols to bind the individual to the collective destiny of the nation or the race. Within this liturgical apparatus, the Roman Empire offered an especially potent resource, since it could be presented simultaneously as a historical fact, a moral exemplar, and a metaphysical promise. Imperial Rome had, after all, achieved precisely what the totalitarian movements claimed to seek: the fusion of disparate peoples and territories into a single disciplined order under the authority of an exceptional leader. It is this combination of concrete historical precedent and limitless symbolic plasticity that made *romanità*, and the broader idea of Rome, so serviceable to regimes that depended on the perpetual mobilization of the masses and the constant renewal of charismatic legitimacy.²⁷⁴

At the same time, it would be a mistake to treat the totalitarian relationship with Rome as a single, undifferentiated phenomenon. Italian Fascism and German National Socialism approached the Roman past from divergent ideological premises, and the differences between them are as instructive as the similarities. For Mussolini and the Fascist regime, Rome was an inheritance to be reclaimed: Italy was the literal, territorial, and racial continuation of the empire of the Caesars, and *romanità* accordingly functioned as a discourse of restoration, in which the Duce appeared as the natural successor to Augustus and the Fascist state as the rightful heir to a civilization that had never truly disappeared, only fallen dormant on Italian soil.²⁷⁵ For Hitler and the ideologists of National Socialism, by contrast, Rome occupied a more ambivalent position. The Reich could admire Roman power, organization, and martial discipline, and could mine Roman history for lessons about empire and race, but it could not claim Rome as an unbroken national patrimony in the way Fascist Italy did. Nazi thought instead tended to read the

²⁷⁴ On the cult of *romanità* as a flexible and shifting ideological resource rather than a fixed doctrine, see Romke Visser, "Fascist Doctrine and the Cult of the Romanità," *Journal of Contemporary History* 27, no. 1 (1992): 5–22; and Marla Stone, "A Flexible Rome: Fascism and the Cult of Romanità," in *Roman Presences: Receptions of Rome in European Culture, 1789–1945*, ed. Catherine Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 205–220.

²⁷⁵ On the Fascist construction of Italy as the direct and unbroken heir of imperial Rome, see Mariella Cagnetta, *Antichisti e impero fascista* (Bari: Dedalo, 1979); and Luciano Canfora, *Ideologie del classicismo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1980).

Roman Empire through the lens of its decline, attributing its fall to racial mixture and to the corrosive, “Judaized” influence of Christianity, and thereby transforming Rome into a cautionary tale as much as a model, a warning of what might befall any Nordic or Aryan civilization that failed to safeguard the purity of its blood.²⁷⁶

Given these substantial differences in emphasis, chronology, and ideological function, this chapter treats Fascism and National Socialism as related but distinct case studies rather than as a single, homogeneous totalitarian myth of Rome. Examining these two cases in sequence, rather than collapsing them into a single narrative, makes it possible to ask a more precise comparative question: not simply whether totalitarian regimes appealed to Rome, but how and why two regimes that are often grouped together under the single heading of “fascism” drew such different conclusions from the same imperial past.

6.1 Romanità and the Fascist Myth of Imperial Rome

“Rome is our point of departure and our point of reference: it is our symbol, or if you will, our myth.”²⁷⁷ Benito Mussolini, 1922

The Roman Empire, as an idea and as a model, represented a central and diffused component of Italian Fascist ideology and culture. During the twenty years of the Fascist dictatorship, images of and allusions to imperial Rome came to saturate state-sponsored culture. The Italian Fascist regime’s interest in establishing its historical rootedness and imperial Rome’s identity as the last time that a unified,

²⁷⁶ The fullest study of the National Socialist appropriation of the classical past, and of the Nazi reading of Rome through the lens of its racial decline, is Johann Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans: How the Nazis Usurped Europe’s Classical Past*, trans. Richard R. Nybakken (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

²⁷⁷ Benito Mussolini, cit. in Cornelio Di Marzio, ‘Il pensiero di Mussolini, “La romanità” e la Storia’, *Bibliografia Fascista* 14. 3 (March 1939) 197.

dominant Italy existed, made “romanità” one of the most determined tropes of Fascist ideology and culture. Romanità, the quality of Romanness, for the Fascists, meant a profound spiritual and historical destiny to be made real through fascism.

Romanità, in Fascist hands, was an extremely malleable and changing ideological construct. Its meanings and uses shifted, as political and cultural conditions varied between 1922 and 1943. “Rome” gave form to ideological constructs such as economic autarchy, Italian military prowess, imperial destiny, demographic urgency, the cult of the leader, national culture and Fascism’s civilizing mission. At the same time, the Italian Fascist “Rome” was flexible and shifting: during the Fascist *ventennio*, “Rome” appeared in Fascist culture to support both nationalism and internationalism, peace and war, stasis and change, patrician and popular. In the last few decades, scholars such as Luciano Canfora and Mariella Cagnetta have begun to analyze the extensive role of romanità in Fascist ideology and culture. The first research on the Fascist appropriation and re-interpretation of Italy’s Roman past confronted the subjects of academic and intellectual life.

6.1.1 The Concept of “Romanità”

Fascist interest in linking the Rome of the Caesars (Rome at its military height and epoch of greatest unity) and the Rome of Mussolini began in the 1920s, as the newly instated regime searched for legitimacy. From the start, Fascist ideology looked back to the Roman empire as a source of stability and tradition. Fascism came to power presenting itself as the force which would unite Italy and Italians after centuries of disunity and foreign occupation. Early Fascist rhetoric spoke about “renovation” through a “return to Roman values”; the Roman values elevated by Fascism in its first decade centered on idealist notions of the patria in which the nation/state was a spiritual and universal force through which its citizens achieved identity and fulfilment.²⁷⁸ With this, the regime collapsed the Roman

²⁷⁸ Franco Ciarlantini, ‘Il Fascismo e la romanità, Augustea (1938), 2.

empire into Fascist conceptions of the state as the transcendent agent through which Italy's historical greatness would be achieved. According to Fascist ideology, this "ethical state" which drew its roots from the empire founded by Augustus was the antidote to the chaotic materialism of liberalism and Marxism. The Roman empire, according to Fascist ideologists, was an organic and stable society, in striking contrast to the disorder and individualism represented by liberal democracy.²⁷⁹ This early version of *romanità* celebrated the institutions and laws of Rome, using *romanità* for domestic purposes as way to "make the patria great".

Fascist symbolism, as it developed in the 1920s, located the Roman legacy at its core and depended heavily upon *romanità* for its coherence. The Fascist imaginary which dominated Italian visual culture between 1922 and 1943 mobilized an endless array of fasci, eagles, Romulus and Remus she-wolves, Roman battle standards, soldiers, triumphal arches and columns. Fascism's primary symbol and its namesake, the *fascio*, the double-edged axe bound by rods, was taken from the lictors who carried fasci behind the Roman magistrates as symbols of authority. As one contemporary explained, the *fascio* perfectly suited Fascism because "during all the centuries of Roman power it represented Roman power; it was the sign of collective force in the face of individual force... [the *fascio*] symbolizes unified, coordinated public power, without the suppression of the individual"²⁸⁰. Fascism appropriated its gestures, as well as its symbolism, from Rome with the *passo romano* (Roman march) and the Roman salute.

With the Fascist conquest of Ethiopia and the declaration of empire in 1935, *romanità* came to serve the ends of empire, the cult of the Duce, militarism and xenophobia. As the Fascist regime radicalized in the wake of the war in Ethiopia, *romanità*, in both content and form, became more militant and exclusive: Fascist propaganda used ancient Rome's domination of the Mediterranean as the rationale and justification for the Fascist empire of Mussolini. Fascist conquests in

²⁷⁹ Pietro Cogliolo, 'La romanità ed il presente rinnovamento italico', *Le professioni e le arti* (1933), 5.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

North Africa and the Aegean, argued Mussolini, were only moves to regain lands properly and historically belonging to Italy. The League of Nation's economic sanctions against Italy in 1936 for its invasion of Ethiopia and the regime's attendant autarchy campaign lent *romanità* a new force and a new character. Romanita linked to autarchy gave historical support to the argument for the superiority of Italian models, styles and products.²⁸¹ The argument for autarchy held that Italy was so rich in tradition and resources (in fact, the source of the most important of all western traditions, the classical) that other influences only corrupted it.

Marcello Piacentini, the architect responsible for the urban renewal of Rome, Brescia, Bergamo, Genoa and the University City in Rome was widely perceived as the official architect of the regime and as representing the traditionalist, monumentalizing wing of government-supported architecture. In July 1938, he declared: "one must have the courage to carry out some rejections, and prepare for a stabilization of values more our own; more our own in terms of epoch and more our own as a people."²⁸² The search for cultural expressions "more our own" together with the charged rhetoric of *italianità* (Italianness) and *romanità* accelerated the official search for an updated Roman aesthetic style. The cult of the Duce, the cult of the charismatic authoritarian leader, was buttressed by *romanità*. By the middle 1930s, as Mussolini solidified his dictatorship and as Achille Starace, the Party Secretary, created the mass structures for the diffusion of the leader cult, the reigns of Julius Caesar and Augustus were reinterpreted to match Mussolini's. Thus, Julius Caesar and Mussolini shared "the will to fix a unifying and balanced center and a common will to action"²⁸³. Mussolini's purposes, like those of Augustus, were to forge "political, family and social order...[to] re-stabilize the Roman peace after decades and decades of civil

²⁸¹ For a discussion of the intellectual formulations of "cultural autarchy", see Marino (1983), part three, 'La disgregazione della cultura autarchica', especially section II, 'La bonifica della cultura'.

²⁸² Marcello Piacentini, JJ *Giornale di Italia* (15 July 1938).

²⁸³ Ciarlantini, 2.

struggles and bloody wars”.²⁸⁴ In this reading of *romanità*, Mussolini, just like Augustus, was a lawgiver and peacemaker who created a unified state based on laws applied equally to all citizens.

As the 1930s progressed and Fascist Italy solidified its alliance with Nazi Germany, the regime radicalized *romanità* to provide an eugenic explanation of Italian and Fascist superiority and African and Slav inferiority²⁸⁵. In the wake of the war in Ethiopia, *romanità* assimilated a racial component, often depicting Africans and political opponents (such as the Spanish Loyalists) as barbarian or subhuman. Fascist propaganda increasingly stressed the idea that present-day Italians were racial descendants of the Romans. In this reading, Liberal Democracy and Marxism were the creations of lesser races; statism rooted in the universal idea of Rome was the natural governing system of a race descended from the Caesars. After the passage of the antisemitic Racial Laws in 1938, Fascist propaganda included Jews among the non-Latin barbarians threatening the reborn Roman empire.

6.1.2 Mussolini's Rome

In this and the next section the scope is to undertake a detailed analysis of Mussolini's specific reception of classical antiquity, as evinced in his numerous writings and speeches²⁸⁶, since it is of capital importance from the point of view of Italian Fascism. The intention is to underline how Il Duce created a personal, but at the same time public and "political," discourse on antiquity. In the 44 volumes of Mussolini's *Opera Omnia* can be traced the key themes of Mussolini's idea of Fascism and its connections with Rome. Fascism, to a high degree Mussolini's creation, was in a certain sense a modern ideology which looked at the future, but at the same time looked back at an idealized Roman past. This created a field of tension that provided Fascism with much of its dynamic as well as its

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ La menzogna della razza, exhibition catalogue (Bologna 1994).

²⁸⁶ These have been collected and edited as the *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, ed E. and D. Sumsel, 44 vols. (Florence 1951-1981)

attraction. Romanità can be seen as a universal ideal which was highly suited for the quasi-religious discourse which Mussolini tributed to the so-called "consensus" in which the regime found itself at the beginning of the 1930s.²⁸⁷

Mussolini's oratory and writing style were closely reproduced, studied, and emulated by the Fascists and played a key role in the creation of consensus: as Rosiello states that "the production and reproduction of typical uses of fascist language identify themselves nearly totally [...] with the rhetorical style and writing of Mussolini, presented itself as imitable model: which this model was in fact followed and reproduced by all those (hierarchs, journalists, all kinds of intellectuals) who were given the task of organizing consensus. There is no fascist language or language of fascism which does not follow the stylistic and rhetorical uses of Mussolini."²⁸⁸ His language echoed as it were in the language of propagandists and intellectuals. Therefore, its importance and impact cannot be underestimated.

As a politician, Mussolini was a pragmatist, capable of riding the tides. He was, already in the 1920s, "in reality a masterful political tactician, skilled in the arts of popular journalism and in the manipulation of propaganda and political symbols."²⁸⁹ According to Bondanella, these skills helped him to win and consolidate power. The same is true for the study of romanità, as Cofrancesco observes: "The Ideals (of Romanness propaganda), which are put to the front, can only successfully mask profane interests if they at least partly succeed in giving a response to certain needs, fears, preoccupations that live in the social body".²⁹⁰ In his view of classical antiquity, Mussolini was a child of his time. Especially after WW I, the public longed-for direction. A skepticism arose which not only

²⁸⁷ The so-called consensus debate has for long period divided researchers of Fascism and in some cases still does. The controversy was started by Mussolini biographer Renzo De Felice, who stated that the success of Fascism was mostly the consequence of a mutual symbiosis wherein regime and population lived alongside one another without serious interactions until the end of the thirties. See De Felice, R. (2017). *Fascism: an informal introduction to its theory and practice*. Routledge.

²⁸⁸ Leso, Erasmo. "Osservazioni sulla lingua di Mussolini." *La lingua italiana e il fascismo* (1977), 6.

²⁸⁹ Bondanella, Peter. *The Eternal City: Roman Images in the Modern World*. UNC Press Books, 2017, 5.

²⁹⁰ Cofrancesco, Dino. *Appunti per un'analisi del mito romano nell'ideologia fascista*. Il Mulino, 1980, 385.

influenced people's views of the present, but also those of the past. A need for simplified history, for simple stories, was voiced²⁹¹. Mussolini, himself a veteran of the Great War, was no exception to this enthusiasm for oversimplification. He thought of history in largely mythical terms, as did most of the intellectuals just before and under Fascist rule²⁹². His knowledge of classical Rome was very narrow and influenced by eighteenth-century Enlightenment and nineteenth-century revolutionary thinking²⁹³.

Although his erudition in the matter was thus not really extensive²⁹⁴, Roman history was always present in the background and was considered a direct and privileged heritage of Italy: "For the Italian people all is eternal and contemporary. For us it is as if Caesar was stabbed just yesterday. It is something proper to the Italian people, something which no other people have to the same extent²⁹⁵". Mussolini first mentions Roman history in series of articles published in November to December 1908 in *Il Pensiero Romagnolo*, where he talks about Nietzsche's philosophy of force. Still a radical anti-clerical socialist in these days, he attributes the fall of Roman Empire to the negative influence of Christianity and the Jews²⁹⁶. Mussolini's preoccupation with the fall of Rome remains constant in the beginning of his political career. In fact in 1911 (*Il Trentino veduto da un socialista*²⁹⁷) racist motives (writing influenced also by the Libyan campaign) clearly account for his explanation of Rome's decline: "It is not the change in political forms, from republican to monarchic, which indicates the beginning of

²⁹¹ Kytzler, Bernhard. "Theodore Ziolkowski, Virgil and the Moderns. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993." *Scholia: Studies in Classical Antiquity* 5 (1996), 159.

²⁹² Roberts, David D. "How not to think about fascism and ideology, intellectual antecedents and historical meaning." *Journal of Contemporary History* 35.2 (2000): 202.

²⁹³ Ravaglioli, Armando. "La Roma di Mussolini." *Fasti e nefasti del regime fascista nella storia della capitale, Rome* (1996), 9.

²⁹⁴ Vauchez, André, and Andrea Giardina. *Il mito di Roma: da Carlo Magno a Mussolini*. Gius. Laterza & Figli Spa, 2016, 249: "When he spoke of Roman history, Mussolini demonstrated the mediocre culture of a high school student and as a student, sometimes he committed some grave errors."

²⁹⁵ *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 31, 49.

²⁹⁶ *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 1, 174-184.

²⁹⁷ Mussolini, Benito. *Il Trentino veduto da un socialista: note e notizie*. No. 8. Quattrini, 1911.

Rome's decadence, but the corruption of dominant races in too much and too frequent contact with inferior peoples²⁹⁸”

At the outbreak of WWI the Italian socialists were at first radical neutralists, but soon some, including Mussolini, turned “interventionist” and favored Italy's entry in the Great War on Nationalist grounds. As a Fascist, Mussolini struck a clearly imperial note from the very beginning of his career, arguing that (as was the case in classical antiquity) Italy has to return to the sea; the idea of *mare nostrum* is at the core of Fascism and Italy's aims²⁹⁹. After the Versailles Treaty (1919), many Italians considered Italy to have been forgotten by the other nations, and claims were made to regain redeemable territories³⁰⁰. This effort was largely supported by nascent Fascism and its leader Mussolini who saw Italy's destiny in the Adriatic and in the Mediterranean³⁰¹. This destiny, Mussolini also affirms in 1921, lies on the African Continent³⁰².

Rome has thus become the goal and stronghold of Fascism and Italy, and, with Fascism having gained power, from the beginning Rome was the centerpiece of Fascist historicism. Finally, there was also the concept of the Italians as one united people. In February 1923, in a speech directed at the Senate, Mussolini affirmed his Conception of history where the Punic Wars served as an example of national regeneration: “I have a history and life conceptions which I would dare call Roman. One must never believe things are irreparable. Rome didn't believe this even after the Battle of Cannae, when it lost the cream of its generations; all of you certainly remember how the Roman senate moved against Terentius Varro, who, because he wanted to battle against the advice of Pulus Emilius, was certainly among those responsible for the defeat. Rome fell and got up again.”³⁰³

²⁹⁸ *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 33, 154

²⁹⁹ Cagnetta, Mariella. "Mare Nostrum Roma e nazionalismo italiano fra Otto e Novecento." *Mededelingen van het Nederlands Historisch Instituut te Rome* 53 (1994): 36.

³⁰⁰ Such as Fiume, occupied in 1919 by decadent writer D'Annunzio and his “legionnaires”

³⁰¹ *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 13, 143.

³⁰² *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 16, 106.

³⁰³ *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 19, 148.

Mussolini often used the collapse of the Roman Empire as a negative example, but during the consolidation of power, Rome functioned as an ideal of national force and regeneration. By 1929, however, the period of “consensus” could begin, stimulated by the Lateran Pacts, which saw the Italian State, for the first time since its unification, recognized by the Vatican. This arrangement contributed highly to Mussolini’s popularity: he portrayed Rome as the safe haven in which Christianity was harbored, *Roma onde Cristo è romano* (“Rome of which Christ is Roman”) it was said. During the Ethiopian campaign (1935), Rome’s Mediterranean mission and destiny again came to the fore in Fascist classicism. Although Mussolini doubtless shared these views, in his writings and speeches did not make frequent references to classical antiquity³⁰⁴. The cult of *romanità*, which was at its height in this period³⁰⁵, seemed to be supported by il Duce, but he cannot be called a real promoter. It is in a racist context that classical antiquity prominently resurfaced in Mussolini’s oratory. In 1938 antisemitic racial laws were declared in Italy, gradually banning Jews from Italian public life³⁰⁶. The Roman imperial conquest acquired a blatant racist imprint:

“The racial problem for me is a very important challenge, and it is very important that we have introduced it in history of Italy. The Romans of antiquity were incredible racists. The great struggle of Roman Republic was this: to know if the Roman race was able to live alongside other races.”³⁰⁷

³⁰⁴ Nelis, Jan. "Constructing Fascist Identity: Benito Mussolini and the Myth of" *Romanità*." *Classical World* (2007): 400.

³⁰⁵ This is most obvious in the Mostra Augustea della Romanità of 1937-1938, a large-scale exposition which celebrated the bimillenary of Augustus. The first Roman emperor’s bimillenary birthday was lavishly celebrated with parades, publications, and the mentioned exposition organized by Giulio Giglioli. For a detailed account see Cagnetta, Mariella. *Il mito di Augusto e la “rivoluzione” fascista*, Dedalo, 1976.

³⁰⁶ Israel, Giorgio, and Pietro Nastasi. *Scienza e razza nell'Italia fascista*, Il Mulino, 1998.

³⁰⁷ *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 29, 190.

6.1.3 Mussolini and Empire

With Fascism growing increasingly important in Italy's divided political landscape, quite suddenly Rome became one of the central ideas in Fascist nationalism, self-perception, and style. April 21 was chosen as a Fascist celebration of the Birthday of Rome, and Mussolini in a speech claimed that "in the spirit of that city which has given two civilizations to the world, and will give a third, will recognize ourselves, and the regional legions will parade in our order, which is not military and not even German, but simply Roman."³⁰⁸ In the occasion of this celebration in 1922, Mussolini delivered one of his most famous and cited speeches, entitled "*Passato e avvenire*". The speech is highly abstract feeling rather than a "history": "Rome is our point of departure and reference; it is our symbol or, if you wish, our myth. We dream of a Roman Italy, that is wise and strong, disciplined and imperial. Much of what was the immortal spirit of Rome, resurges in Fascism: Roman is the Lictor, Roman is our organization of combat, Roman is our pride and courage: *Civis Romanum sum*."³⁰⁹

Before he came to power, the notion of Empire was at first was bleak, since in 1921 when asked about foreign policy Mussolini defined it as "peaceful expansionism"³¹⁰. But sometime later he became more aggressive since he removed the word "peaceful" in a similar context talking about foreign policy: "The foreign policy program of fascism is in one word: expansionism. Wherever the interest of humankind is at stake, Italy has to be present. It's also time to quit living off the glories of the past. Finally, we have to live, fight, and work for the great future"³¹¹. Then when he was installed as Prime Minister, in one of Mussolini's lectures ("Roma antica sul mare") a military dimension is implicitly added to the foreign policy and expansionism (by mentioning British imperialism), although the ambition of territorial imperialism is denied:

³⁰⁸ *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 16, 224.

³⁰⁹ *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 18, 160-161

³¹⁰ *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 16, 102.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 300.

“But the goal is this empire. To found a city, detect a colony, create an empire, are the prodigies of the human spirit. Empire is not only territorial. It can be political, economic, spiritual. Empire by the way is not an improvised creation. England had Gibraltar after the Peace of Utrecht, had Malta after Waterloo, Cyprus in 1876.³¹²”

Even in 1932, Mussolini avoided the trap of striking an openly territorial and aggressive tone when asked about Imperialism, saying that there are half a dozen imperialisms: “For this reason, empire is not really necessary, even dangerous. The bigger it grows, the more it loses its organic force. But the will to imperialism is one of the elementary forces of human nature, like the will to power... As long as one lives, he is imperialist. He stops being imperialist when he dies”³¹³. So, we can see a diplomatic Mussolini who avoids making territorial and militarist claims, but that is only until the second half of the thirties. When he sent armies to Ethiopia to effectively conquer it, just like ancient Rome, Fascist Italy now aimed to create its’ empire through its “civilizing mission”. Antiquity then served as legitimization and example for the new fascist empire, which draw its force from the past: “Fascist Italy, like Rome before, transforms the conquered lands into images of itself, and for this reason sends its best men there... Its subjects do not ask for autonomy, but, with pride, Italian citizenship.”³¹⁴

To Mussolini at this time, imperialism was not so much a scourge of God as a favor to its new subjects. Despite the atrocities of war, it is depicted as the quintessence of peace and the fulfillment or rather the resurrection of ancient Rome, as he stated in his famous Proclamation of Empire:

“Empire of peace, because Italy wants peace for itself and for all and decides to go to war only when forced by imperious, irrepressible necessities of life.

³¹² *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 21, 363.

³¹³ Ludwig, Emil, and Tomaso Gnoli. "Colloqui con Mussolini." (*No Title*) (1932).

³¹⁴ *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 27, 84.

Empire of civilization and humanity for all the people of Ethiopia ... In this supreme certainty, hold high, legionnaires, the signs, the steel, and the hearts, to salute, after fifteen centuries, the reappearance of the Empire on Rome's fatal hills"³¹⁵.

In the end, even racism is backed by imperialism. In 1938, the year that he enacted his racial laws, and at this time for Mussolini (for the first time in his speeches) one goes with the other and has always done so³¹⁶.

6.2 From Rome to Reich: Antiquity and Nazi Racial Ideology

There was a tension in Adolph Hitler's (1889-1945) approach to antiquity, torn between mere imitation and forthright defiance, a desire to eclipse the past, which required following in its footsteps, repeating the same actions and choices. Rome showed the meaning of history: it simultaneously constituted the ends of history itself and the means to achieve those ends. Roman history was, as Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*, "die beste Lehrmeisterin" ("the best teacher")³¹⁷, the ultimate school for would-be world conquerors. For Hitler, the basic, most fundamental lesson of history that overruled all others was rooted in an unshakable law: the history of mankind was the history of racial conflict.

This idea rested on three core principles. The first, of course, was the very existence of different races, a widely held belief in the wake of nineteenth-century scientific racism³¹⁸. The second was that these races engaged in combat for territorial domination and for their very survival, an eternal struggle that was finally entering a decisive phase. The history of the entire world could be reduced to the story of this racial conflict, the universal principle that was the driver of all

³¹⁵ *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 27, 268-269

³¹⁶ *Opera Omnia*, Vol. 29, 146.

³¹⁷ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), 423.

³¹⁸ *Hitler's Table Talk, 1941-1944: His Private Conversations*, trans. Norman Cameron and R. H. Stevens (New York: Enigma, 2000), night of 21-22 July 1941, 10.

human affairs, as Hitler had written in *Mein Kampf*: “All occurrences in world history are only the expression of the races’ instinct of self-preservation.”³¹⁹ The third principle behind this idea was that the most cunning weapon available in this struggle was miscegenation, the mixing of races via interracial coupling. As Hitler proclaimed while musing about the disappearance of the ancient civilizations of antiquity that so intrigued him³²⁰: “All great cultures of the past perished only because the originally creative race died out from blood poisoning.”³²¹ There is much to be said about the connection (or better mythification) between the ancient Romans and the Nazis, that the regime enforced to justify its racial policies. But for the sake of space, the focus will be put on two of the most impactful and at the same time dramatic themes: racial conflict, the Jewish question and the views on Bolshevism.

6.2.1 Rome, Carthage, and the Nazi Myth of Racial Conflict

Historians of antiquity brought together as part of “the war effort of the German human sciences”³²² certainly did their part by publishing *Röm und Karthago* (Rome and Carthage; 1943), a metaphor for racial conflict between the Semitic East, represented by a Jewish Phoenicia, and a Nordic West, defended by classical Rome. In the book’s preface, Joseph Vogt suggested that the binary opposition between Rome and Carthage served as a racial-political allegory: “Rome and Carthage are among those names bequeathed by history that have become concepts, symbols of bottomless racial hatred and a war of extermination...Four generations [were] dragged into the struggle between these two peoples of

³¹⁹ Ibid., night of 31 March 1942, 381.

³²⁰ Adolf Hitler, “Rede auf einer NSDAP-Versammlung in München,” 2 May 1928, in Hitler, *Reden, Schriften, Anordnungen*, ed. Institut für Zeitgeschichte München (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1992–2003), vol. 2, pt. 2, 801–30.

³²¹ See Claude Nicolet, *The World of the Citizen in Republican Rome*, trans. P. S. Falla (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 1.

³²² “Kriegseinsatz der deutschen Geisteswissenschaften”: see Frank-Rutger Hausmann, “Deutsche Geisteswissenschaft” im Zweiten Weltkrieg: Die “Aktion Ritterbusch” (1940–1945) (Dresden: Dresden University Press, 1998).

opposing races.³²³ Rome's victory in a race war that was "saturated with hate" possessed a singular consequence "of the utmost importance": "The Semitic people were removed from any position of domination [in the Mediterranean]."³²⁴ The war between Rome and Carthage has long been interpreted as a war between two powers seeking domination of the Mediterranean basin. But this book posed the issue in resolutely racial terms: "One question that has scarcely been asked until now comes to the fore: was this conflict, so full of portent, predetermined by the blood of the peoples involved, with Rome, which was fundamentally Nordic, facing a rebellion from Carthage, whose otherness stemmed precisely from its Punic essence?" This was thus a "racial confrontation," since the people of Carthage could be "characterized as fundamentally Semitic."³²⁵

Cato the Elder's (234 – 149 a.C.) famous phrase *Delenda est Carthago* (Carthage must be destroyed) thus possessed a racial-historical meaning: Rome destroyed a Phoenician civilization with both African and Asiatic roots, which would have smothered a nascent Western civilization in the cradle if Hannibal or any other Carthaginian general had managed to take Rome. The Romans had saved the Nordic race from Phoenician infection and preserved their superior racial essence from being overrun once again. Rome's victory over Carthage was, for the Nazis, a fundamental landmark in the history of racial conflict. After a conversation with Hitler, Goebbels noted in his diary on 28 February 1945 that "the Punic War was more decisive [than the Seven Years' War] in a world-historical sense and its effects were felt over several centuries"³²⁶, which without Rome would not have included either Western civilization or the survival of an

³²³ Joseph Vogt, "Unsere Fragestellung," in *Rom und Karthago: Ein Gemeinschaftswerk*, ed. Vogt (Leipzig: Koehler und Amelang, 1943), 5.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

³²⁶ The Goebbels Diaries: The Last Days, trans. Richard Barry (London: Martin Secker and Warburg, 1978), 12.

Aryan race now threatened once again by a new Hannibal in the form of Joseph Stalin³²⁷.

In his book *The Myth of the 20th Century*, Alfred Rosenberg³²⁸ (1893 – 1946) lamented only that Rome had not been able to press its advantage further. The Romans had rid the world of the Punic menace, but then they had stopped in their tracks when they could have continued the war and extermination all the way to Palestine and reduced Jerusalem to rubble: World history might well have taken a very different course had the obliteration of Carthage been accompanied by a total annihilation of all the other Semitic Jewish centers in the Near East. The act of Titus came too late. By then, the Near Eastern parasite was no longer centered in Jerusalem but had already spread its strongest tentacles from Egypt and Hellas to Rome itself.³²⁹ Titus, the conqueror of Jerusalem (along with his father Vespasian), had acted too late: the siege of the city and destruction of the Temple, in the year 70 CE, should have taken place much earlier. Furthermore, to contain and prevent the infectious spread of the Semitic parasite throughout the empire, the Romans should have exterminated the defeated Jews as well: if strategic considerations alone did not suffice, then biology demanded it. Their fatal error had been Rome's downfall and led to its ultimate disappearance.

With the Roman war in Palestine, the Jew made his debut in the racial conflict. The enemy of Greece had been the racially inferior Asiatic peoples. The first enemy of Rome was a bastardized Phoenicia, which had been both African and Asiatic³³⁰. The leaders of the Semites never joined in battle themselves against the master race, except in the first century of the Common Era. The Jews' direct military confrontation with Rome and its legions, however, was an exception to

³²⁷ Chapoutot, Johann. *Greeks, Romans, Germans: how the Nazis usurped Europe's classical past*. Univ of California Press, 2016, 376-383.

³²⁸ Alfred Rosenberg was one of the principal ideologists of Nazism — a key figure in shaping the racial and pseudo-philosophical doctrine behind the regime, though he held more of a theorist's role than a commanding one in practice.

³²⁹ Rosenberg, Alfred. *The Myth of the 20th Century*. Historical Review Press, 2000, 25.

³³⁰ Ferdinand Fried attributed the alleged hate that the Jews felt for Rome to a spirit of revanche and thirst for vengeance, a spirit of Semitic solidarity with the civilization destroyed by Scipio Africanus. See Fried, *Der Aufstieg der Juden* (Reichsbauernstadt Goslar: Verlag Blut und Boden, 1937), 99.

the rule in their war against the empire: open war, combat at arms, was rare. Contrary to the Greeks' nemesis Persia or Hannibal's Carthage, which both fought in the open field, the Jews struck from the shadows, cloaked in the darkness of conspiracy. But in their war against the Roman Empire, the Jews would wield one particularly insidious and cunning armament, their secret weapon: Pauline Christianity³³¹.

6.2.2 The Mortal Struggle Between East and West in the Classroom

The school textbooks and ideological education materials produced by the party and its various organs also helped disseminate this racial reading of the Punic Wars. Thus, a Nazi Party pamphlet titled *Dieser Krieg ist ein weltanschaulicher Krieg* (This war is an ideological war)³³², published in 1942, elaborated on the concept of "six thousand years of race war"³³³.

Textbooks lingered proudly upon this fantastic example of racial conflict between the Nordic and Semitic worlds; Walther Gehl's tome devoted a whole chapter, some eight pages, to "the racial war against the Semitic people"³³⁴: it was this victory against an enemy race that had allowed the seemingly modest capital of Latium, once confined within Italy, to strive toward a global empire, because it had needed first to confront the overt opposition of its eternal Semitic nemesis. The Hohmann and Schiefer textbook, meanwhile, explained the stakes of the conflict in simple terms: "The Romans were Indo-Germanics, the Carthaginians Semites. The war to come was a war between races that would determine which of the Nordic or Eastern civilizations would dominate the shores of the Mediterranean. The Nordic will to power squared off against the Semitic mercantile spirit."³³⁵ After narrating the twists and turns of the conflict, the authors

³³¹ Chapoutot, Johann, 305-310.

³³² *Dieser Krieg ist ein weltanschaulicher Krieg, Schulungsgrundlagen für die Reichsthemen der NSDAP für das Jahr 1941/1942, Der Beauftragte des Führers für die Überwachung der gesamten geistigen und weltanschaulichen Schulung und Erziehung der NSDAP* (Berlin, 1942), BABL/RD/NSD 16/29.

³³³ Dr. Stellrecht, "Sechstausend Jahre Rassenkampf," in *ibid.*, 39-46.

³³⁴ "Roms Aufstieg zur Weltmacht im Rassenkampf gegen das Semitentum," in Gehl, *Geschichte*, 80-87.

³³⁵ Walter Hohmann and Wilhelm Schiefer, *Lehrbuch der Geschichte: Oberstufe*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Diesterweg, 1940), 91.

awarded the victory to Rome: “The decision had been won by the Aryan race, and Europe escaped any danger of domination by a Semitic people.”³³⁶ Yet both Greece and Rome had eventually succumbed to the East in this clash of racial civilizations. The two Nordic civilizations had perished less from direct combat, however, although the wars had indeed hemorrhaged the best Nordic blood, than from the surreptitious, insidious, infectious, and ultimately fatal infiltration of foreign blood.

As for Rome, the 1938 reforms declared that teachers should present “the Punic Wars as a war of races” in which the Romans had emerged victorious before subsequently succumbing to those they had vanquished: the instructor had to elucidate “the fatal consequences of Roman imperialism (“the Punicization of Rome”),³³⁷” the empire’s global expansion having led, through a deplorable lack of vigilance, to moral decadence and the dissolution of Roman blood. The text by Hohmann and Schiefer followed these instructions to the letter. In their telling, the fanfare heralding Rome’s racial victory over Carthage had scarcely begun to play when the hammer fell: “But the victory cost them dearly. The Roman peasantry was drained from the horrible loss of life and the systematic devastation of the Italian campaigns. The Roman people were wounded to their core. Profound disruptions in society and the economy rattled the state to its foundations. It was ultimately fatal to Rome to allow itself to be dragged into the Hellenistic East.”³³⁸

6.2.3 Rome's Undoing: Jews as Racial Enemy in Nazi Ideology

At the heart of this racial confrontation between East and West stood the war of the Jews against Nordic civilization. The cause of the East and the cause of the Jews were one and the same, for it was the hostility of the Jews toward the Nordic race that gave birth to the clash of East versus West. The inferior races and

³³⁶ Ibid., 95.

³³⁷ Fritz Schachermeyr, “Die nordische Führerpersönlichkeit im Altertum,” in *Humanistische Bildung im nationalsozialistischen Staate, Neue Wege zur Antike, Erste Reihe, Heft 9* (Leipzig and Berlin: Teubner Verlag, 1933), 42.

³³⁸ Walter Hohmann and Wilhelm Schiefer, *Lehrbuch der Geschichte für höhere Schulen: Oberstufe* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Moritz Diesterweg, [1940]), 95.

bastardized racial amalgamations of the East had spread throughout the ancient world via the diaspora. In a pamphlet on the question of “the Jew in Greco-Roman antiquity,” Hans Oppermann described how “the contribution of the Jews to the general Orientalization of the ancient world is clearly visible. The Jews thus played a very special role in the global advance of the East.” Orientalization and the “Jewification of the ancient world”³³⁹ were synonymous. In Nazi anti-Semitic discourse, Jewishness and Orientalism were frequently interchangeable: the Jews were no longer just a race but rather a mixture of inferior peoples. The Jews, we learn, were spiteful and bellicose by nature. Their way of life was based on hatred of all that was different, of the goyim who did not possess the good fortune to be similarly chosen, as Fritz Schachermeyr wrote: “Hatred, that is the Jew’s primary business.”³⁴⁰

Numerous writers, like Hans Bogner, emphasized that the Jews hated Rome, fighting the empire and ultimately subverting Roman law and order, since, as vandals and fierce individualists, they were hardly faithful to themselves and only at best to their “tribe,” while the Indo-Germanics defined themselves by the superior reality of the “state” that they constructed³⁴¹. The historian Ferdinand Fried, in his essay *The Rise of the Jews*, returned to this aspect in his discussion of the suffering of the Indo Germanic peoples of antiquity: “It was with great hatred that the Romans and Greeks were persecuted and bloodily exterminated,”³⁴² an “unquenchable Semitic hatred.”³⁴³ Only through the ruthless and resolute action of Hadrian’s Roman legions was the Jews’ revolutionary subversion finally defeated, but Hadrian, like Titus, failed to push his advantage all the way to the necessary

³³⁹ Hans Oppermann, *Der Jude im griechisch-römischen Altertum*, ed. Beauftragen des Führers für die Überwachung der gesamten geistigen und weltanschaulichen Schulung und Erziehung der NSDAP (Munich: Franz Eher Verlag, Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1943), 6.

³⁴⁰ Fritz Schachermeyr, *Indogermanen und Orient: Ihre kulturelle und machtpolitische Auseinandersetzung im Altertum* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1944), 447.

³⁴¹ Hans Bogner, “Die Judenfrage in der griechisch-römischen Welt,” in *Forschungen zur Judenfrage*, vol. 1, *Schriften des Reichsinstitut für Geschichte des neuen Deutschlands* (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1937), 82.

³⁴² Ferdinand Fried, *Der Aufstieg der Juden* (Reichsbauernstadt Goslar: Verlag Blut und Boden, 1937), 125.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 124.

end, the destruction of the Jewish people, their complete biological eradication: “The plow worked over the site of the Temple to demonstrate that it should never be rebuilt. Thus, the dream of a Jewish state was ruined, but not that of Jewish world domination.[...] The Jewish state had disappeared, but not the Jewish people.³⁴⁴” Since then, the Jewish people had survived, dispersed throughout the empire, their bonds of solidarity unbroken, their overt war replaced by the surreptitious and cunning activities below the surface, subterranean sapping, “mining and working from within”³⁴⁵ through racial infiltration, curial intrigue, and financial subterfuge³⁴⁶. The Jews were still possessed by their “racial hatred.” They were a population of rabid dogs that dreamed only of death and devastation, which thoroughly justified a preventive racial war and the attendant radical measures of confinement and isolation, even extermination, of an enemy that had to be destroyed before it was allowed the time to strike: as the tragic example of Rome showed, “there could be no peace with them; they could only be destroyed”³⁴⁷, without half measures or similar weakness that had so hobbled the Romans’ repression of this fundamentally destructive people. One can easily see in this example how the traits of Nazi anti-Semitism itself were turned around and used against those who were its victims: the terms used to describe the victims are the same as those used to describe anti-Semitic violence (pogrom, extermination) while the role of the butcher or executioner is ascribed to the Jewish people. The Jews had first chosen the path of open, violent war against Nordic mankind. The vigorous response against the Jewish rebellion by the legions of Titus and Hadrian had led the Semites to seek other, more subversive paths in a battle that was now subterranean and concealed in the darkness of a racial conspiracy.

³⁴⁴ 3000 Jahre jüdischer Hass, Schulungs-Unterlage no. 13, Der Reichs organisationsleiter der NSDAP, Hauptschulungsamt (n.p., n.d.), BABL/RD/ NSD 9/34-13, 5-6.

³⁴⁵ Fried, *Der Aufstieg der Juden*, 99.

³⁴⁶ 3000 Jahre jüdischer Hass, 7.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 8. The booklet repeated a phrase from *Mein Kampf*: “Mit dem Juden gibt es kein Paktieren, sondern nur das harte Entweder-Oder” (“There is no making pacts with Jews; there can only be the hard: either—or” [206]).

Many of these writers sought to “draw out the lessons offered by antiquity,” since history was, following Hitler’s lead in *Mein Kampf*, the “great teacher.”³⁴⁸ History taught that the Jews’ rise to power was accomplished not through the traditional means of conquest or taking possession, in the virile Nordic manner, but through trickery, since the Jew was an expert at blending in, simulating and dissimulating. Fritz Schachermeyr also emphasized the affinities between “world Jewry and global empire,”³⁴⁹ remarking that the Jews were feverish partisans of Caesar and his imperial aims and that the “global power” of the Jewish “hydra”³⁵⁰ was indissolubly linked to a global empire that allowed it to spread around the world. Soon enough, the Jews had tried to circumvent the imperial authority of Rome by insinuating themselves into the heart of the capital city.

6.2.4 The Jew Paul and the Subversion of the Empire

For Hitler and the Nazis, Christianity meant Judeo-Christianity, a Judaized Christianity, promoted and spread throughout the entire world to bring down the Roman Empire. Hitler was at once resolutely anti-Christian and profoundly agnostic, all the while believing in the existence of some form of divine providence and the laws of nature, a perpetual race war in which only the strongest would survive. His only real, tangible certitude was the existence of blood and race and their submission to the laws of nature, which subjected all races to the strongest among them and condemned a race that welcomed inter breeding to ineluctable degeneration.

This healthy worship of nature was the polar opposite of Christianity, which for Hitler was a religion of Jews, with the exception of Jesus, for “Christ was an Aryan”³⁵¹: “It’s certain that Jesus was not a Jew. The Jews, by the way,

³⁴⁸ Eugen Fischer and Gerhard Kittel, *Das antike Weltjudentum: Tatsachen, Texte, Bilder*, vol. 7 of *Forschungen zur Judenfrage* (Hamburg, Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1943), 99-105.

³⁴⁹ Fritz Schachermeyr, *Indogermanen und Orient: Ihre kulturelle und machtpolitische Auseinandersetzung im Altertum* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1944), 481.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 482.

³⁵¹ *Hitler’s Table Talk*, midday, 27 February 1942, 143.

regarded Him as the son of a whore, of a whore and a Roman soldier.³⁵²” Hitler thus exempted him from the law defining Jews and imagined that, as a result of his paternal Roman ancestry, Jesus had narrowly escaped Judaism³⁵³. The figure of Christ was singularly absent from Hitler’s countless fulminations against the Christian religion. Christ’s message had, in his opinion, been perverted by his disciples and apostles, most notably the former Jew Paul, a late convert and neophyte zealot who appeared in Hitler’s mind to represent Jesus’s malevolent twin. Paul was the most heinous demon of Christianity, the man who put the religion in the service of the Jews and in doing so perverted its fundamental message: “The decisive falsification of Jesus’s doctrine was the work of St. Paul. He gave himself to this work with subtlety and for purposes of personal exploitation.” Hitler argued that Jesus’s original Christianity was actually an Aryan revolt against the Jewish domination of Palestine: “For the Galilean’s object was to liberate His country from Jewish oppression. He set Himself against Jewish capitalism, and that’s why the Jews liquidated Him.”³⁵⁴

The Jew Saul, who later converted and took the name Paul, was in his heart an implacable enemy, a zealous tormentor of the Christians, as Hitler explained in a 1941 conversation against the backdrop of the war with the Soviet Union: “Paul of Tarsus (his name was Saul, before the road to Damascus) was one of those who persecuted Jesus most savagely. When he learnt that Jesus’s supporters let their throats be cut for His ideas, he realized that, by making intelligent use of the Galilean’s teaching, it would be possible to overthrow this Roman State which the Jews hated. It’s in this context that we must understand the famous ‘illumination.’³⁵⁵” The torturer Saul thus became Paul, the faithful, the proselyte, the apostle. In Hitler’s eyes, his conversion was clearly insincere. There was no mystical encounter with the divine, as Paul would have it; it was merely a cold political

³⁵² Ibid., midday, 21 October 1941, 76.

³⁵³ Ibid., night of 29–30 November 1944, 721.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., midday 21 October 1941, 76.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., midday, 21 October 1941, 76–77.

calculation. The Jews hated the Romans, who had conquered them and taken all their gold: “Think of it, the Romans were daring to confiscate the most sacred thing the Jews possessed, the gold piled up in their temples! At that time, as now, money was their god.” Hence Saul’s unquenchable resentment: “St. Paul discovered that he could succeed in ruining the Roman State by causing the principle to triumph of the equality of all men before a single God.³⁵⁶” Paul was like the Bar Kokhba of the Gospels. Paul had perceived the revolutionary and eminently subversive nature of the Christian message: if all men were creatures of God, all equal before him, a political system founded on hierarchy and discrimination like the aristocratic Roman Empire would be doomed to extinction. In fact, it was precisely this politically subversive aspect of Christianity that Paul so capably exploited in winning over the dregs of the empire with the message of their equality before God. Christianity would successfully unite all the losers, the weak and the enslaved, of an empire that reserved its aristocratic superiority for a racial elite: “Whilst Roman society proved hostile to the new doctrine, Christianity in its pure state stirred the population to revolt.³⁵⁷”

Christianity had been the weapon of the oppressed and the inferior, the banner of a vile, teeming horde that wished only to rise up against the Roman racial aristocracy and overthrow the empire: “Paul used his doctrine to mobilize the criminal underworld” and unleashed it against the Roman Empire. Paying no heed to chronology, Hitler turned Paul into a precursor, or even a protoagent, of Bolshevism. The political subversion he had introduced in Rome was comparable, indeed identical to that of contemporary Bolshevism: “St. Paul [...] organized a proto-Bolshevism.³⁵⁸” This conversation occurred on 13 December 1941, just as Hitler had given the oral order to exterminate the Jews of Europe³⁵⁹. At the very moment when the policy of extermination was being decided, Hitler was making

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 77.

³⁵⁷ *Hitler’s Table Talk*, midday, 21 October 1941, 78.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., midday, 13 December 1941, 143.

³⁵⁹ See Christian Gerlach, *Krieg, Ernährung, Völkermord: Forschungen zur deutschen Vernichtungspolitik im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1998).

frequent and sustained references to the destruction of the Roman Empire by Pauline Christianity, which was nothing other than an ancient manifestation of the Jewish conspiracy. The use of the Christian Bolshevik/Rome-Reich analogy was unsettling and anxiety provoking, giving a feeling of world-historic urgency that could help the imagination acclimatize itself to the idea of extirpation and the suggestion of the Final Solution: at the very moment when a counterattack had grounded the invasion of the East to a halt, a moment when the Wehrmacht (for the first time since 1939) found itself on the defensive, it was essential to do everything possible to prevent the Reich from succumbing to the same fate as Rome.

The downfall of the Roman Empire was thus, for Rosenberg and Hitler, directly imputable to the Judeo-Christian revolution, the insurrection of inferior masses rallied by its subversive egalitarian message against their Nordic masters: “The sensational event of the ancient world was the mobilization of the underworld against the established order. This enterprise of Christianity had no more to do with religion than Marxist socialism has to do with the solution of the social problem.³⁶⁰” Christianity was the form that the Jewish conspiracy took in the ancient world. What the Jews could not attain by outright, open revolt, through armed insurrection against Rome, they had done by introducing into the empire an egalitarian monotheism that undermined the Roman state, destabilizing the foundations of its society and civilization. Hitler and Rosenberg thus reversed the terms of our common understanding of this history. Christianity is generally perceived as a phenomenon that helped to regenerate and transform the Roman Empire, whose decline is attributed to the later barbarian invasions.

There was a further irony to Hitler’s lamentations about moderns’ poor understanding of ancient culture, which might well have given him joy, the void left by this lack of knowledge gave free rein to fantasy and imagination and provided space for any and all forms of fictional deformation of the past, including

³⁶⁰ *Hitler’s Table Talk*, midday, 17 February 1942, 313.

the statement: “If nowadays we do not find the same splendid pride of race which distinguished the Grecian and Roman eras, it is because in the fourth century these Jewish-Christians systematically destroyed all the monuments of these ancient civilizations. It was they, too, who destroyed the library at Alexandria.³⁶¹”

6.2.5 Rome Bolshevized: The Nazi Link Between Christianity and Communism

The antisemitic discourse served also to incite the popular opinion against the Bolshevik soviets. Hitler frequently associated Christianity with Bolshevism. More than a comparison, it was an identification, a deliberate effort to convince the world that the two were one and the same. The Christianity of antiquity and the Bolshevism of the modern era were separated by roughly two thousand years, but to Hitler they were both substantially part of the same movement. The comparison between the two fulfilled a legitimating function of fundamental importance: the vigor of the Nazis’ political and military engagement against Bolshevism was justified by the harm done in the past by its Christian ancestors, those levelers of the Roman Empire, whose contemporary descendants now threatened to prove fatal to the new Indo-Germanic Reich. Christianity and Bolshevism were in essence both ideologies that mobilized the dregs of humanity against the state and the rule of born leaders. Christianity and Bolshevism both contained subversive political messages and sought to sow revolution and anarchy. The one presaged the other, “Christianity is a prototype of Bolshevism: the mobilization by the Jew of the masses of slaves with the object of undermining society.³⁶²” Bolshevism and Christianity were identical in principle and in essence. Both offered a message of equality that aimed to mobilize the oppressed against their betters, those who held the power of the state. The two ideologies were both subversive revolutionary weapons forged by the Jews for use against the rest of Nordic Aryan mankind. In Rome, Christianity had brought down the state built by Nordic man and caused a

³⁶¹ Ibid., evening of 5 July 1942, 563.

³⁶² Ibid., night of 19 October 1941, 75–76.

cultural regression with an unprecedented wave of vandalism. The revolution that followed this regression was repeated in Russia, where the Bolshevik menace now threatened to swallow the entire world unless the Reich stepped in to set things right: “Rome was Bolshevized, and Bolshevism produced exactly the same results in Rome as later in Russia³⁶³”: destructive results that Hitler learned of with the first reports from the SD (intelligence agency of the SS) regarding the hasty executions and scorched-earth tactics employed by the NKVD (Soviet secret police) in the summer and autumn of 1941.

The Jewish conspiracy was thus not born with *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1903). It dated back far beyond the modern era. The Jewish conspiracy was a two-thousand-year-old enterprise, a war of cunning that the Jews had first unleashed with the advent of Christianity against the Roman Empire before attacking the Aryan with Bolshevism. Hitler expressed this delusion in the most terse manner imaginable, with this striking analogy: “Saul has changed into St. Paul, and Mardochai into Karl Marx.³⁶⁴” Saul the Jew had become, through cold calculation and political pragmatism, Saint Paul the apostle; in the exact same way, Mardochai (the family name of Karl Marx’s father) had disguised himself as Marx, the prophet of communist revolution. This message was transmitted and disseminated in an SS pamphlet that attacked the Judeo-Christo-Bolshevik conspiracy by comparing the “Jew Paul” with the “Jew Marx,” confronting the spirit of “Proletarians of the world, unite” inherent in Paul’s words in Galatians 3:26–29 (KJV)³⁶⁵.

Christianity and Bolshevism contained such striking similarities that it was all too easy to see them as the exact same thing. Both were revolutionary ideologies, egalitarian and destructive of the current order. Both contained

³⁶³ Ibid., midday, 21 October 1941, 78.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 79.

³⁶⁵ “For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

messages that claimed to be universal, seeking to unite and organize the oppressed of the world against their masters, who naturally belonged to the Nordic race. Led by Paul, Judeo-Christianity opposed the Roman idea of a sovereign racial nation-state in favor of a universal spiritual empire, thus claiming that all races, masters and slaves alike, were equal before God: “If the Jew has succeeded in destroying the Roman Empire, that’s because St. Paul transformed a local movement of Aryan opposition to Jewry into a supra-temporal religion, which postulates the equality of all men amongst themselves, and their obedience to an only god. This is what caused the death of the Roman Empire.³⁶⁶” The Judeo-Christian revolution aspired to be global, universal. To fulfill that aspiration, it had to bring down the Roman national and racial state.

We find ourselves confronted with the overarching, driving principle of history: racial conflict. The all-out race war between the Jew and the Aryan pitted Christianity against the Roman Empire. History was only repeating itself two thousand years later in the Nazi fight against Bolshevism. The times might have changed, but the actors stayed the same. The Reich picked up the torch from Rome, just as Rome had once received it from Greece.

Conclusion

Across the two regimes examined in this chapter, the Roman Empire functioned as a total political myth, a usable past pressed into the service of a revolutionary present. For all that separated Fascist Italy from National Socialist Germany, both movements shared a common structural impulse: each sought to legitimize itself by anchoring its project in antiquity, and each treated the memory of Rome as evidence that national or racial greatness, once attained, could be attained again. Rome supplied both regimes with the same essential grammar: an image of unity against fragmentation, of hierarchy against equality, of imperial vitality against liberal decadence, and with a teleology of decline and renewal in which the

³⁶⁶ *Hitler’s Table Talk*, midday, 21 October 1941, 78.

movement itself appeared as the agent of resurrection. In this sense the cult of Rome was one expression of what scholars have identified as the core myth of fascism: the promise of national palingenesis, of rebirth out of the ashes of a decadent order.³⁶⁷

The commonalities did not end with this shared mythology of rebirth. Both regimes mobilized Rome to justify territorial expansion and conquest, presenting modern imperial violence as the restoration of an ancient and rightful order, whether in the Fascist invasion of Ethiopia or in the National Socialist pursuit of living space in the East. Both, in their turn, folded the figure of the Jew into their Roman narratives, and in both cases the explicitly racial and antisemitic reading of antiquity intensified as the regimes radicalized toward war. And both invoked the spectre of Rome's fall as a didactic warning, a reminder that even the most powerful civilization could rot from within. Rome, for Fascists and Nazis alike, was at once a model to be emulated and a *memento mori*.

Yet beneath this shared vocabulary lay two fundamentally different conceptions of what Rome was, and of how the present stood in relation to it. For Italian Fascism, Rome was an inheritance: Italians were the literal descendants of the Romans, the peninsula was the very soil over which the Caesars had ruled, and Mussolini could therefore present himself not as an imitator of Augustus but as his reincarnation. Romanità was a discourse of continuity and restoration, and the empire it invoked was overwhelmingly a model, a lost grandeur to be revived. For National Socialism, by contrast, Rome could never be a national patrimony in this direct sense, for the Germans were not Romans; admiration for Roman power and discipline coexisted with the awareness that the Reich was Rome's heir and successor rather than its continuation. Nazi thought accordingly dwelt far less on

³⁶⁷ On the core fascist myth of national rebirth or palingenesis, of which the resurrection of Rome was the principal Italian expression, see Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Pinter, 1991); on the wider sacralization of politics within which this rebirth myth operated, see again Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*.

Roman grandeur than on Roman decline, reading the fall of the empire as the supreme cautionary tale of a Nordic civilization destroyed from within.³⁶⁸

Nowhere is this divergence sharper than in the place each regime assigned to race in its reading of Roman history. Italian racism was a late, contested, and largely instrumental development: antisemitism formed no part of Fascism's founding doctrine, the movement counted Jews among its early adherents, and Mussolini openly derided National Socialist biological racism well into the 1930s; only with the racial laws of 1938, and under the gravitational pull of the German alliance, did a racial interpretation of *romanità* harden into state policy.³⁶⁹ Even then, Fascist racism remained grafted onto a *romanità* that was essentially spiritual, cultural, and statist, and that continued to prize precisely those features of Rome (its law, its universal citizenship, its civilizing mission, even its capacity to harbour a Christianity that could be called "Roman") which the Nazis identified as the very poison that had killed the empire. For National Socialism, race was not a late accretion but the foundation: the whole of Roman history was rewritten as a chapter in the eternal war of blood, from the struggle of a "Nordic" Rome against a "Semitic" Carthage to the subterranean Jewish conspiracy that, through the Pauline gospel of equality, mobilized the empire's slaves and dissolved its racial aristocracy from below. What Fascism celebrated in Rome (its openness, its assimilative universality, its fusion of many peoples under a single law) was for Nazism the precise mechanism of Roman death.

Rome thus served, in the end, as a mirror in which each regime contemplated its own deepest preoccupations. Fascism, gazing into that mirror, saw continuity, grandeur, and a destiny to be reclaimed; National Socialism saw the perpetual menace of racial dissolution and a fate to be averted at all costs. The shared invocation of "Rome" thus concealed two incompatible philosophies of

³⁶⁸ On the Nazi reading of Rome through the lens of its decline rather than its grandeur, and on the contrast with the Fascist appropriation of antiquity, see Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans*.

³⁶⁹ On the comparatively late, contested, and instrumental character of Italian racial doctrine, which became state policy only with the racial laws of 1938 and was never fully reconciled with the biological racism of the Nazi model, see Aaron Gillette, *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy* (London: Routledge, 2002).

history, one of restoration, the other of racial struggle, and the comparison undertaken in this chapter suggests that the apparent unity of a single totalitarian “cult of antiquity” dissolves, on closer inspection, into the divergent uses to which a common past could be put. That two regimes so often bracketed together could draw such opposite lessons from the same imperial history is itself the most telling measure of the distance between them.

Chapter 7: The United States and Rome

Introduction: The Eagle in the Mirror

No historical analogy has proven so durable, so capacious, or so ideologically promiscuous in the American political imagination as the comparison between the United States and the Roman Empire. From the classical republicanism of the Founders through the toga epics of the Cold War to the febrile debates of the post-9/11 decade, Romans have haunted American self-understanding with a persistence that no other civilization can rival. Yet the content and the emotional valence of the analogy have shifted dramatically across these eras: what once served the revolutionary generation as a republican cautionary tale against monarchy and corruption mutated, by the turn of the twenty-first century, into an argument about imperial overreach, civilizational decline, and the structural fragility of hegemonic power. This chapter examines how the Rome analogy has been deployed in contemporary American political and intellectual culture. It takes as its principal anchors three sophisticated works that represent the breadth of the genre at the opening of the new century: Cullen Murphy's *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (2007), Niall Ferguson's *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (2004), and Harold James's *The Roman Predicament: How the Rules of International Order Create the Politics of Empire* (2006); but it situates these within a wider field of scholarship that includes Paul Kennedy's theory of imperial overstretch, the critical jeremiads of Chalmers Johnson and Andrew Bacevich, the recent comparative synthesis of Peter Heather and John Rapley, and the historiographical reflections of Edward Watts. Read together, these texts reveal that the Rome analogy functions less as a neutral historical comparison than as a contested field of political meaning.

The very persistence of the analogy demands explanation. As Cullen Murphy observes at the opening of his inquiry, the comparison is so naturalized, so reflexive, that it occurs to observers almost involuntarily: Rome, he writes, is “the eagle in the mirror.”³⁷⁰ The reference is not merely to the shared iconography of the imperial eagle, the marble colonnades of Washington, or the Latin mottoes of the republic, though these visual rhymes are real enough. It extends to something deeper: a structural resemblance between two polities that each understood themselves as universal civilizations that each projected their particular values as the common inheritance of mankind. Edward Watts has argued that the rhetoric of Roman decline has, in fact, been a tool of political mobilization for more than two thousand years, that “decline and fall” is less a description of a singular historical event than a rhetorical genre, endlessly available for reuse by anyone seeking to dramatize the stakes of contemporary change.³⁷¹ The Romans themselves were the first to lament Roman decline, and they did so most stridently at the very height of imperial power. The American appropriation of this rhetoric is therefore a faithful continuation of it.

The early twenty-first century brought a particularly intense phase of this perennial debate. The terrorist attacks of September 2001, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the growing awareness of American fiscal vulnerabilities combined to produce a veritable cottage industry of Rome–America comparisons. Murphy is careful to note, however, that the analogy has never been a simple equation: the comparisons, he writes, are “often contradictory” and “go far beyond military power and global reach.”³⁷² Niall Ferguson, surveying the same landscape, observed that the term “American empire” had recently migrated from the vocabulary of radical critique to that of mainstream foreign-policy

³⁷⁰Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2008), 6.

³⁷¹Edward J. Watts, *The Eternal Decline and Fall of Rome: The History of a Dangerous Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 1–9. Watts argues that the rhetoric of Roman decline has been a tool of political mobilization for more than two millennia, deployed by figures as varied as third-century-BC Roman politicians and twenty-first-century American journalists.

³⁷²Murphy, *Are We Rome?*, 7.

commentary, a description to be analyzed and, in some quarters, embraced.³⁷³ Ferguson himself was among those who embraced it, though in a characteristically qualified register: he argued that the United States was indeed an empire, had always been one, but was a “relatively unsuccessful” one, a colossus unable to commit to the sustained project of liberal governance that its own power made possible.³⁷⁴

Harold James, writing from a different intellectual tradition rooted in economic history and the history of ideas, was more circumspect about the direct comparison, preferring to use Rome as a structural model for the dynamics of rule and commercial order rather than as a historical analogy for American foreign policy as such.³⁷⁵ What all three authors share, despite their methodological and political differences, is an awareness that the Roman parallel is inherently reflexive: that to compare America to Rome is always already a political act, and that the comparison shapes perception as much as it illuminates it. Murphy makes the epistemological point explicit when he invokes Albert Schweitzer’s observation that scholars writing lives of Jesus tend to discover their own reflections in the wells of ancient evidence; in the same way, those who explore the example of Rome tend to find that it resonates uncannily with their own concerns.³⁷⁶ This reflexivity does not invalidate the analogy, but it does require the analyst to attend to the conditions under which particular versions of the comparison become persuasive, and to the political interests they serve.

³⁷³Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America’s Empire* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), 2.

³⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 1–4. Ferguson surveys the migration of the term “American empire” from the vocabulary of left-wing critique to mainstream and even celebratory usage after September 2001.

³⁷⁵Harold James, *The Roman Predicament: How the Rules of International Order Create the Politics of Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 1–5.

³⁷⁶Murphy, *Are We Rome?*, 5–6. The phrase “the eagle in the mirror” serves as the title of Murphy’s prologue.

7.1 From Gibbon to the Pentagon: The Genealogy of a Diagnostic Idea

The modern Rome–America debate cannot be understood apart from the towering figure discussed above, Edward Gibbon, whose *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, published in installments between 1776 and 1788, established the master narrative against which all subsequent declinist arguments are measured. It is one of the more arresting coincidences of intellectual history (a coincidence Harold James makes central to his analysis) that Gibbon’s first volume appeared in the same year as both Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* and the American Declaration of Independence. The convergence of these three texts in 1776 marks the moment at which the relationship between commerce, empire, and decline became a sustained object of theoretical reflection in the Anglophone world.³⁷⁷ As mentioned in chapter 3, Gibbon bequeathed to posterity a powerful and portable set of diagnostic categories: the corrosion of the citizens by luxury, the substitution of mercenary for citizen armies, the fiscal exhaustion of overextended dominion, and the enervating effects of a religion that turned men’s attention from the city of man to the city of God. Each of these categories has been pressed into service by American commentators, and each carries the authority of Gibbon’s sonorous prose and apparent empirical rigor.

Watts has traced with particular care how the post-Gibbon narrative of Roman decline became available for appropriation by any nation anxious about its own trajectory. The genius of Gibbon’s framework, Watts argues, lies precisely in its adaptability: because Roman history is so long and so well documented, it offers an array of ready-made stories of decline that can supply context for almost any contemporary anxiety.³⁷⁸ The American case is distinctive only in the intensity and self-consciousness with which the Roman precedent has been invoked. Where eighteenth-century Americans looked chiefly to the Roman Republic for models of constitutional design and civic virtue, their twenty-first-century descendants

³⁷⁷See Chapter 3 above; On the long afterlife of Gibbon’s framework, see Watts, *Eternal Decline*, 197–220.

³⁷⁸Murphy, *Are We Rome?*, 5–7; Watts, *Eternal Decline*, 1–9.

have turned increasingly to the Roman Empire (and above all to its decline and fall) as a framework for understanding their own predicament. This shift in emphasis is itself diagnostic: it reflects the transformation of the United States from a fragile republic anxious about preserving its liberty into a global hegemon anxious about preserving its dominance.

The intellectual scaffolding for the contemporary debate was erected in significant part by Paul Kennedy, whose *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1987) introduced the concept of “imperial overstretch” into the mainstream of political discourse. Kennedy argued that great powers, in order to remain great, faced a constant triple tension among investment, defense, and consumption, and that the relative decline of hegemonic states typically resulted from an imbalance between a nation’s resources and its strategic commitments.³⁷⁹ Although Kennedy’s book ranged across five centuries of European history and was not primarily about the United States, it was read in Washington as a prophecy of American decline. Both Ferguson and James engage directly with Kennedy’s thesis, and both qualify it: Ferguson notes that the Soviet Union, not the United States, succumbed to overstretch first, while James observes that the more pressing danger to American power may be internal rather than the result of foreign military commitments.³⁸⁰ Kennedy’s framework nevertheless supplied the analytic vocabulary (overstretch, the lag between economic and military power, the burden of global commitments) that structures the entire contemporary debate.

³⁷⁹Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), 114–135.

³⁸⁰Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, 514–535; Ferguson, *Colossus*, 210–213. Ferguson notes that Kennedy’s overstretch thesis was partially vindicated by the Soviet collapse, even as the U.S. case differs.

7.2 Triumphalists, Declinists, and the Question of Imperial Acknowledgment

Murphy³⁸¹ organizes the contemporary American debate around two broad camps that he calls “triumphalists” and “declinists,” each drawing on the Roman precedent but reading it with opposite emphasis. The triumphalists (figures such as Charles Krauthammer, William Kristol³⁸², and the neoconservative intellectuals associated with the Project for the New American Century) saw in the post–Cold War moment an opportunity for what Krauthammer called “unapologetic and implacable demonstrations of will,” analogous to the order-giving role Rome had played in the ancient Mediterranean. If Rome had brought the *pax romana*, the United States could bring a *pax americana*, and the resentment of lesser powers was simply the price of civilizational leadership.³⁸³ Ferguson³⁸⁴ documents the explicitly Roman imagery deployed in this moment, noting that American regional military commanders were described in the press as “modern-day proconsuls,” descendants of the warrior-statesmen who had ruled Rome’s provinces.³⁸⁵

Ferguson’s own position was more nuanced than either pole, and this nuance constitutes one of the most intellectually distinctive features of *Colossus*. He argued that the United States was indeed an empire (and he had no principled objection to this, insisting that many parts of the world would benefit from a period of American rule) but that it was a peculiarly dysfunctional one, suffering from three structural deficits: a financial deficit, a manpower deficit, and what he

³⁸¹ Murphy far from being academic, was a journalist and magazine editor (long at *The Atlantic* and *Vanity Fair*), and *Are We Rome?* is an essayistic popular nonfiction. Among the rest of the authors cited he’s probably the less politically involved, as he didn’t take partisanship or a thesis to defend, but producer of an engaging, balanced book for general readership.

³⁸² Krauthammer and Kristol were engaged directly in the post-Cold War foreign-policy debate, as they are associated with the Project for the New American Century, an advocacy organization founded specifically to push for assertive American primacy and, concretely, for regime change in Iraq. So when they reached for the Roman analogy (proconsuls, the *pax americana*) they were arguing for a program they had personally staked their careers and their movement’s credibility on.

³⁸³ Murphy, *Are We Rome?*, 7. The triumphalist position is associated with Charles Krauthammer, William Kristol, and Max Boot.

³⁸⁴ Ferguson is a professional historian (Harvard, Stanford) who also writes heavily for general audiences, therefore his engagement is more academical/historical rather than political.

³⁸⁵ Ferguson, *Colossus*, 257–261. American regional commanders were described in the press as “modern-day proconsuls.”

memorably termed an “attention deficit.”³⁸⁶ This last was, for Ferguson, the most analytically interesting. Americans, he contended, were constitutionally ill-suited to the long business of imperial governance, which requires patience, administrative persistence, and the willingness to remain engaged in distant territories for decades. Rome’s legions stayed; American forces tended to leave. The successes of the American imperial project, above all the occupations of Japan and West Germany after 1945, were precisely those cases in which American occupation had been sustained and systematic; the failures, from the Philippines to Haiti to Iraq, were cases of intervention “in haste, on the cheap and through proxies.”³⁸⁷

The declinist camp found its most uncompromising voice in Chalmers Johnson, whose “Blowback Trilogy”, culminating in *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic* (2006), offered the period’s most sustained left-critical deployment of Rome. Johnson, a former Cold War Asia specialist and CIA consultant turned fierce critic of American militarism, read Gibbon as describing the displacement of a republic by a militarized empire that ended in bankruptcy, defeat, and dissolution, and he was certain that the United States was destined to follow the same trajectory.³⁸⁸ Johnson’s *Nemesis* contains an explicit chapter comparing the “imperial pathologies” of Rome, Britain, and America, arguing that militarism and imperialism are necessarily the enemies of democratic self-governance, and that the apparatus of global military bases, covert operations, and an unaccountable executive was hollowing out the American republic from within.³⁸⁹ Where Ferguson saw American empire as something to be reformed and

³⁸⁶Ibid., 286–304.

³⁸⁷Ibid., 2–3, 303–304.

³⁸⁸Chalmers Johnson, *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), esp. chap. 2, “Comparative Imperial Pathologies: Rome, Britain, and America.” See also Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

³⁸⁹Johnson, *Nemesis*, 1–38. Johnson read Gibbon as describing the displacement of a republic by a militarized empire ending in bankruptcy and dissolution.

made more effective, Johnson saw it as a moral and constitutional catastrophe to be dismantled before it destroyed the republic that sustained it.

Andrew Bacevich occupied a third and distinctive position, one that resists easy classification along the triumphalist–declinist axis. A West Point graduate and career Army officer turned scholar, Bacevich argued in *American Empire* (2002) that the United States had pursued an essentially imperial foreign policy throughout its history: instead of the territorial empire of the ancient or early-modern type, the USA pursued an empire of “openness,” dedicated to breaking down barriers to the advance of American economic and cultural power. Bacevich conceded that empire in the traditional sense requires territorial aggrandizement, but he insisted that the more academic term “hegemony” captured the spirit of American dominance, whose benevolence lay largely in the eyes of those being dominated.³⁹⁰ In his later *New American Militarism* (2005), Bacevich made the most precise of the structural Roman comparisons: the transformation of the American armed forces from a citizen-soldier military, in which all classes of society served, into the professional All-Volunteer Force that emerged after Vietnam, strongly resembled the change in the Roman army that accompanied Rome’s devolution from republic to empire.³⁹¹ Bacevich’s critique thus joined Murphy’s: both saw in the professionalization of the military, and in the consequent separation of military society from civilian society, a structural pathology with a clear Roman precedent and an ominous Roman conclusion.

³⁹⁰Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 2–7. Bacevich concedes that empire in the traditional sense requires territorial aggrandizement but argues that informal hegemony is the more apt category.

³⁹¹Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 23–33. Bacevich notes that the shift from a citizen-soldier military to the All-Volunteer Force resembles the Roman transition from republican militia to professional imperial army.

7.3 Structural Parallels: Military Power, Privatization, and the Moral Erosion

The most substantive dimension of the contemporary comparison between the United States and Rome concerns institutional structure: the specific ways in which Rome organized its military power, its imperial administration, and its citizens, and the degree to which analogous features can be identified in contemporary American practice. Here Murphy's analysis is at its most searching. He organizes his inquiry around five domains of parallel (the character of the two capitals, the structure of the military, the privatization of public functions, the management of cultural diversity, and the problem of borders) and each comparison reveals both genuine structural similarity and the limits of comparison.³⁹²

On the question of military power, Murphy identifies two dimensions of Roman–American parallel that he regards as genuinely worrying. The first is the widening divide between military society and civilian society. Rome's early army had been a citizen militia: the legions were composed of free citizens who fought because they had a stake in the republic's survival and who returned to civilian life when the campaign ended. The professionalization of the Roman military under Marius and the emperors created a class of soldiers whose primary loyalty was to their commanders rather than to the state: a development that contributed directly to the political instability of the late republic and the principate. Murphy and Bacevich alike see an analogous development in the United States, where the all-volunteer force, professional and formidable, has become increasingly insulated from the broader civilian population whose wars it fights. The second parallel concerns the demographic problem of manpower. Rome's military expansion eventually outran its capacity to staff the legions with citizens, leading to growing reliance on *auxilia*: non-citizen troops who served in exchange for pay and the eventual promise of citizenship. By the late empire, Roman armies were composed

³⁹²Murphy, *Are We Rome?*, 115–122.

predominantly of barbarian *foederati* with little organic connection to the civilization they nominally defended. Ferguson translates this directly into the language of his “manpower deficit,” arguing that the United States simply lacks the human resources, and above all the political will to mobilize them, that effective imperial governance requires.³⁹³

Murphy’s treatment of privatization is among the most original contributions of *Are We Rome?* to this genre. The Roman *publicani* were private contractors who performed public functions under government contract (collecting taxes, supplying the legions, constructing public works) and the system was notoriously prone to corruption, since the contractors had every incentive to maximize extraction from the populations they administered and were accountable to their investors rather than to the communities they served. Murphy notes that the United States had in recent years embarked on what he calls a “privatization binge,” outsourcing to private firms an extraordinary range of functions including intelligence analysis, prison management, border control, and military logistics, and he draws on the Roman precedent to suggest that this represents a structural transformation in the relationship between the state and its citizens, one in which the very word “privatization” can shade, as it did in Rome, into a polite synonym for corruption.³⁹⁴ Heather and Rapley reinforce the comparison from the Roman side, noting that the late imperial reliance on independent military contractors and the fragmentation of the state’s monopoly on organized violence were symptoms of a deeper structural transformation in which the imperial center progressively lost the capacity to mobilize the resources it had once commanded directly.³⁹⁵

Ferguson’s analysis of American military power is more quantitative and less analogical. He emphasizes the extraordinary scale of American military

³⁹³Ferguson, *Colossus*, 286, 170–178.

³⁹⁴As argued above in chapter 2. Also see Murphy, *Are We Rome?*, 250–256. On the *publicani* and Roman tax-farming, see also Peter Heather and John Rapley, *Why Empires Fall: Rome, America, and the Future of the West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023), chap. 2.

³⁹⁵Heather and Rapley, *Why Empires Fall*, chaps. 3–4. The argument that Rome “shaped its own enemies” through its economic stimulation of the periphery is central to their thesis.

dominance (the United States in the early 2000s accounted for a remarkable share of total global defense spending) but argues that this dominance conceals a structural paradox: the very scale of American capability creates pressure for its deployment, generating imperial commitments that then require still further resources to sustain.³⁹⁶ This is Kennedy's overstretch thesis, but Ferguson gives it a distinctive and Gibbonian twist. He argues that the real source of American overstretch is not its foreign military commitments but its domestic fiscal commitments, above all the looming crisis of Social Security and Medicare. "It is their preoccupation with the hazards of old age and ill health," Ferguson writes, "that will prove to be the real cause of their country's fiscal overstretch, not their preoccupation with the hazards of terrorism."³⁹⁷ It is not the barbarians at the gates but the internal corruption of the fiscal order that threatens the empire from within, a diagnosis that returns the debate to the territory Gibbon first mapped.

7.4 Republic and Empire: The Constitutional Question

Perhaps the most politically charged dimension of the comparison concerns the relationship between republican institutions and imperial power: the question of whether, as Rome passed from republic to empire, it underwent a constitutional transformation now being replicated in the United States. This question animated the Founders' engagement with Rome, and it returns with renewed urgency in the post-9/11 literature. The Roman analogy here is twofold, concerning both the formal structure of rule (the shift from senatorial republic to imperial principate) and the informal culture of civic virtue that Roman writers themselves identified as the foundation of self-governance.

Murphy develops the constitutional parallel most explicitly. He notes that Octavian's conversion of the republic into the principate was achieved through a gradual accumulation of extraordinary powers under the forms of republican legality, a point Roman historians like Tacitus made with bitter irony when they

³⁹⁶Ferguson, *Colossus*, 268–270, 286–299.

³⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 269–272.

observed that the outward forms of republican government were preserved throughout the imperial period as “a progressively meaningless nod to the past.”³⁹⁸ Murphy sees a structural analogy in what he describes as the drift of American political culture toward the “princirate”: the concentration of executive power, the erosion of legislative oversight, the expansion of governmental secrecy, and the insulation of the national security apparatus from democratic accountability. He is careful not to claim that the United States has already become a princirate; he argues rather that the structural pressures toward this outcome are real and that the Roman precedent suggests they should be taken seriously.³⁹⁹ Edward Watts’s *Mortal Republic* deepens this analysis by reconstructing the precise mechanisms: the normalization of political violence, the erosion of unwritten constitutional norms, the willingness of partisans to subordinate institutional health to short-term advantage, by which the Roman Republic destroyed itself, offering an implicit but unmistakable warning to a contemporary American polity exhibiting analogous symptoms.⁴⁰⁰

Ferguson’s treatment of the constitutional question is characteristically paradoxical. He notes that one argument advanced to distinguish the United States from genuine empires is the durability of its republican constitution: unlike Rome, whose republican order collapsed under the weight of civil war and the ambitions of military strongmen, the American system has withstood comparable pressures without fundamental transformation. “But unlike Rome,” he writes, “its republican constitution has withstood the ambitions of would-be Caesars,” noting that the Roman Republic was already 460 years old when it fell.⁴⁰¹ This is a genuinely important observation: the American constitutional tradition has proven more resilient than the Roman in certain respects, and this resilience cannot be dismissed as mere formalism. Yet Ferguson is aware that constitutional resilience and

³⁹⁸Murphy, *Are We Rome?*, 49–57. On Octavian’s “restoration” of the republic, see also Edward J. Watts, *Mortal Republic: How Rome Fell into Tyranny* (New York: Basic Books, 2018).

³⁹⁹Murphy, *Are We Rome?*, 150–156.

⁴⁰⁰Watts, *Mortal Republic*, 1–20, 263–280.

⁴⁰¹Ferguson, *Colossus*, 246–249.

institutional health are not the same thing, and that the structural pressures he identifies operate at a level below formal constitutional arrangements and may eventually overwhelm them.

James situates the constitutional question within his broader account of the relationship between domestic and international rule-making. He argues that the slide from republic to empire is driven not primarily by the ambitions of individual leaders but by the logic of a rule-based international order that requires enforcement, drawing the dominant power (almost against its will) into increasingly imperial modes of engagement. He poses the question directly: is “the slide from republic to empire” an inevitable one?⁴⁰² The question is left without a confident answer, but the burden of his analysis suggests that the dynamics of hegemonic power tend to generate imperial behavior regardless of the political intentions of those who exercise it. The parallel with Rome, on this reading, is not that individual American leaders have aspired to be emperors, but that the structural position of a hegemonic power in a rule-based order creates pressures toward imperial conduct that are difficult to resist: a more sobering argument than either triumphalist celebration or declinist warning, because it locates the problem in structure rather than in contingency.

The question of civic virtue connects the constitutional dimension to the broader cultural comparison. Roman writers from Sallust and Cicero through Livy and Tacitus developed a powerful narrative in which the corruption of republican institutions was causally bound to the corruption of civic character: the virtues of frugality, discipline, and public-spiritedness that had made early Rome great were progressively eroded by the wealth and luxury that imperial expansion brought, producing a population unfit for self-governance and dependent on bread and circuses (*panem et circenses*) for its political satisfaction. Murphy traces this narrative’s genealogy with care, noting that the Roman who epitomized republican ideals, figures like Cato and Marcus Aurelius, were already nostalgic in their own

⁴⁰²James, *The Roman Predicament*, 259–260.

time. Bacevich's account of American militarism converges on the same theme from a different angle, arguing that a citizenry seduced by the spectacle of war, and insulated from its costs by a professional military and deficit finance, has lost precisely the civic capacities that republican self-governance requires.⁴⁰³ Against this declinist consensus stands Victor Davis Hanson, whose *Carnage and Culture* offers a triumphalist counterpoint: Hanson grounds the historic lethality and effectiveness of Western armies in a classical inheritance of citizenship, dissent, and freedom, arguing that an army produced by a free culture will always hold the advantage.⁴⁰⁴ The contrast between Hanson's confidence and the anxieties of Murphy, Johnson, and Bacevich illustrates how the same classical inheritance can underwrite radically opposed readings of the American condition.

7.5 Borders, Outsiders, and the Limits of Assimilation

The management of borders and the integration of outsiders represent one of the most charged dimensions, precisely because it maps directly onto contemporary debates about immigration, citizenship, and national identity. Murphy devotes a substantial portion of his book to this theme, drawing on the Roman precedent with notable historiographical sophistication. He begins by acknowledging what is genuinely impressive about Rome's record: until the rise of America, he observes, Rome was history's most successful multi-ethnic state, capable of incorporating peoples of radically different backgrounds into a common imperial culture while progressively extending to them the privileges of citizenship.⁴⁰⁵ The Edict of Caracalla of 212 AD, which extended Roman citizenship to virtually all free inhabitants of the empire, represents a moment of imperial universalism that has attracted contemporary attention; Murphy quotes the French intellectual Régis Debray's proposal for an analogous "new Edict of Caracalla" extending American

⁴⁰³Bacevich, *New American Militarism*, 23–33; Murphy, *Are We Rome?*, 139–205.

⁴⁰⁴Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise to Western Power* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 1–23. Hanson grounds Western military efficacy in a classical inheritance of citizenship, dissent, and civic freedom—a triumphalist counterpoint to the declinist literature.

⁴⁰⁵Murphy, *Are We Rome?*, 165–183.

citizenship to allied democracies. The proposal is meant half in jest, but its underlying logic, that a universal empire committed to universal values should ultimately universalize its citizenship, is historically grounded and structurally coherent.⁴⁰⁶

The darker side of the Roman assimilation story is equally relevant. Murphy notes that Rome's capacity for assimilation was not unlimited: the influx of peoples across the Rhine and Danube in the fourth and fifth centuries eventually exceeded the mechanisms of Romanization, producing not assimilation but the progressive transformation of Roman culture itself under demographic pressure. This is the pattern that gives the contemporary American immigration debate its anxious edge, articulated most stridently by Samuel Huntington's *Who Are We?*, which argued that the scale and pace of recent immigration threatened not the physical safety of the United States but its cultural coherence.⁴⁰⁷ Here, however, the most recent scholarship complicates the analogy in instructive ways. Peter Heather, in *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, and Heather and Rapley jointly in *Why Empires Fall*, argue that the "barbarian" confederations that eventually overwhelmed the Roman frontier were not an external given but were themselves shaped (enlarged, enriched, and rendered more formidable) by centuries of interaction with the Roman economy and military. Rome, in this reading, "shaped its own enemies," stimulating the development of peripheral societies whose growing power it then failed to accommodate.⁴⁰⁸ The lesson for the American case is not that immigration imperils cultural coherence, but that hegemonic powers tend to transform their own peripheries in ways that generate new and unanticipated rivals.

This last insight is the central and most original contribution of Heather and Rapley to the contemporary genre, and it deserves emphasis because it

⁴⁰⁶Ibid., 602–607. Murphy cites Régis Debray's proposal for a "new Edict of Caracalla."

⁴⁰⁷Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004). For the Roman pattern of barbarization, see Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 13–62.

⁴⁰⁸Heather and Rapley, *Why Empires Fall*, chaps. 3–5

reframes the entire debate. Where the classic declinist account (Gibbon's, and in a sense Murphy's and Johnson's) locates the cause of decline in internal corruption, and where the realist account locates it in overstretch, Heather and Rapley locate it in a dynamic of *development at the periphery*. Both imperial Rome and the industrial West, they argue, experienced rapid economic growth that generated new flows of wealth toward the center while simultaneously, and inadvertently, stimulating the economic and political development of the periphery they dominated. In Rome's case this meant the formation of larger and more durable frontier confederations and the emergence of a stronger peer competitor in the Sassanid Empire; in the modern case it means the rise of the formerly colonized global periphery (above all China and the developing economies of Asia) whose growth was catalyzed by the very Western-dominated order they now challenge.⁴⁰⁹ The decline of empires, on this account, is not primarily a story of moral decay or military exhaustion but of structural transformation: empires decline because they change the world, and then fail to adapt to the world they have changed.

James's approach to the borders question is characteristically structural and complements the Heather–Rapley thesis. In his chapter on “Terminus: Beyond the Fringe,” he traces the relationship between center and periphery in imperial systems, arguing that empires tend to be most fragile at their most remote outposts, a dynamic visible both in the Roman experience of the *limes* and in the contemporary American experience of Iraq and Afghanistan. The question he poses is whether the instantaneous communications and global interconnectedness of the modern world have altered this dynamic. His tentative answer is that the structural logic of peripheral fragility remains operative but works through different mechanisms: the political difficulty of maintaining domestic support for costly and distant commitments over the long horizons that effective imperial governance requires.⁴¹⁰ This is, once again, Ferguson's “attention deficit” under

⁴⁰⁹Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 145–250

⁴¹⁰James, *The Roman Predicament*, 99–117 (chap. 6, “Terminus: Beyond the Fringe”).

another name, and it points to a structural weakness specific to democratic empires, whose governors are accountable to publics with limited patience for long-horizon commitments.

7.6 The Fiscal Question: Debt, Deficit, and the Dynamics of Decline

The fiscal dimension of the analogy occupies a central place in all the major texts, though it receives its most systematic treatment in Ferguson and James. James begins his analysis of American sustainability with a Smithian question: do hegemonic states face a constant danger of overspending their capital and hence of ruin? He quotes Smith's observation that when national debts accumulate beyond a certain degree, there is scarcely a single instance of their having been paid off fairly, the liberation of public revenue having always been achieved by an open or a concealed bankruptcy.⁴¹¹ The parallel between this eighteenth-century observation and the fiscal situation of the early-twenty-first-century United States is, James suggests, deeply uncomfortable. Discussions of American decline consistently assume a successor power waiting in the wings (Japan or Europe in the 1980s, India or China in the 2000s) but James is skeptical that any rival is close enough to challenge American dominance in the near term, and he suggests that the more pressing danger is the self-undermining dynamic of a hegemon unable to summon the political will to pay for its own commitments.⁴¹²

Ferguson's fiscal analysis is the most technically detailed and the most alarming. He identifies a looming "fiscal crisis of the welfare state" as the primary structural threat to American power, more dangerous in the long run than any external challenge. The scale of the implicit liabilities represented by Social Security and Medicare commitments, he argues, dwarfs the explicit national debt and creates an imbalance no conventional policy response can readily address. Drawing on the work of the economists Jagadeesh Gokhale and Kent Smetters, he

⁴¹¹James, *The Roman Predicament*, 1–5. The framework is derived from Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), and Gibbon, *Decline and Fall* (1776–88).

⁴¹²Ferguson, *Colossus*, 286–299; James, *The Roman Predicament*, 71–72.

calculated the total fiscal imbalance at some \$45 trillion, roughly four times the country's annual output.⁴¹³ The political constraints on addressing this imbalance are formidable: no elected politician can campaign on cutting Social Security and Medicare benefits by more than half or raising income taxes by nearly three-quarters, and the organized power of the elderly (what Ferguson calls Social Security's status as the "third rail" of American politics) renders even modest reform perilous.⁴¹⁴ The result is a crisis that everyone can see but no one has the will to address, producing conditions Ferguson compares to a natural disaster: a "self-sustaining criticality" in which a small additional shock could trigger a catastrophic restructuring of expectations.

The historical analogy Ferguson draws is characteristically oblique. He invokes Gibbon's remark that the finances of a declining empire make an interesting subject and suggests that the American case may be closer to pre-revolutionary France than to imperial Rome: Bourbon France, like contemporary America, had pretensions to imperial grandeur but was by a domestic fiscal crisis its political system could not resolve through normal legislative means.⁴¹⁵ The message for America is unambiguous: the decline of its undeclared empire may be due to a fiscal crisis of the welfare state at home, rather than terrorists at the gates or the rogue regimes that sponsor them. This diagnosis converges, from the opposite end of the political spectrum, with that of Chalmers Johnson, who likewise identified the question of whether the United States could continue to pay for the ambitions of its leaders, whether the sole "hyperpower" was becoming the greatest "hyper-debtor" of all time, as the central threat to the republic's survival.⁴¹⁶ That a conservative economic historian and a left-wing critic of

⁴¹³Ferguson, *Colossus*, 268–285. The \$45 trillion fiscal-imbalance figure derives from Jagadeesh Gokhale and Kent Smetters, "Fiscal and Generational Imbalances" (American Enterprise Institute, 2003).

⁴¹⁴*Ibid.*, 270–272 (table 14).

⁴¹⁵*Ibid.*, 278–279. Ferguson compares the American situation to the implicit-liability crisis of *ancien régime* France.

⁴¹⁶Johnson, *Nemesis*, 1–38; Bacevich, *American Empire*, 215–244.

militarism should arrive at so similar a fiscal conclusion suggests that the diagnosis transcends ideological partisanship.

Murphy's treatment of the fiscal question is less technical but no less troubling. He traces the Roman pattern of fiscal exhaustion through the long decline of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, noting that the empire's crisis involved not merely the inability to fund the legions but a broader breakdown of the administrative and commercial infrastructure that had made Roman prosperity possible. The evidence from underwater archaeology (the dramatic fall in the number of Mediterranean shipwrecks after 200 AD, indicating a collapse in long-distance trade) points to a systemic economic contraction that preceded and contributed to political disintegration.⁴¹⁷ Murphy's concern is that analogous structural indicators might be visible in the contemporary American case: not a dramatic collapse of trade volumes, but a gradual erosion of the productive capacity that underlie American dynamism. The Roman pattern suggests that decline tends to be invisible until it is irreversible; that the metrics of power remain impressive long after the foundations have begun to erode, because hegemonic power generates its own momentum and because the beneficiaries of existing arrangements have every interest in denying that anything is wrong.⁴¹⁸

7.7 The Limits of Analogy: What Rome Cannot Tell Us About America

Having traced the multiple dimensions of the comparison, it is necessary to attend also to the analogy's limits, which many of these authors readily acknowledge. Ferguson is most explicit about the ways the United States differs from Rome and from previous hegemonic empires. Following Dominic Lieven, James and Ferguson both observe that the United States is an empire of a specifically informal kind: its dominance is exercised primarily through cultural and economic influence rather than territorial control, and its rule depends on the compliance and

⁴¹⁷Ferguson, *Colossus*, 286–299

⁴¹⁸Murphy, *Are We Rome?*, 48–65.

cooperation of others in ways Roman imperial rule did not.⁴¹⁹ The Roman empire was, in the last analysis, backed by the physical presence of the legions; American hegemony is backed, in the first instance, by the attractiveness of American culture, the liquidity of American capital markets, and the willingness of foreign governments to hold dollar-denominated assets. This distinction matters because it means the mechanisms of potential American decline differ from those that brought Rome down: American hegemony could erode through the gradual loss of economic and cultural attractiveness rather than military defeat, through what Joseph Nye has called the erosion of “soft power”, and the Rome analogy, primarily a story about military and administrative power, may not be the most useful framework for analyzing this kind of decline.⁴²⁰

The historiography of Rome’s own fall further complicates the analogy. The traditional Gibbonian picture of a cataclysmic collapse has been challenged from two directions. On one side, the “transformation” school of late-antique studies has argued that Rome did not so much fall as gradually metamorphose into the early-medieval world, with far more continuity than the language of “decline and fall” suggests. On the other, Bryan Ward-Perkins has forcefully reasserted that Rome’s end was indeed catastrophic and materially devastating, marked by a precipitous decline in living standards, literacy, and economic complexity; while Kyle Harper has introduced climate change and pandemic disease as decisive factors largely absent from the older accounts.⁴²¹ These scholarly disputes matter for the American parallel because they unsettle the very thing the analogy presupposes: a clear, agreed-upon model of what “decline and fall” actually consisted of. If specialists cannot agree on why Rome fell, or even whether and when it fell, then the confident invocation of the Roman precedent to predict the American future rests on shakier foundations than its proponents typically admit.

⁴¹⁹James, *The Roman Predicament*, 71–72. James draws on Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

⁴²⁰Nye Jr, Joseph S. *Bound to lead*. Basic books, 2016.

⁴²¹Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome*, 169–183; Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 1–21.

Watts makes precisely this point: the malleability of the Roman decline narrative is what makes it so politically useful and, simultaneously, so analytically treacherous.⁴²²

James makes a related point when he insists that his book is not primarily about whether the United States is or should be considered an empire (a question he regards as the subject of a “rapidly expanding but often polemical and superficial literature”) but about the structural dynamics of rule in any complex international system. His claim is that the “Roman dilemma” (the tension between rule and power, between legitimate authority and its conditions of enforcement) is a structural feature of international order rather than a specifically imperial pathology.⁴²³ The United States faces this dilemma because it occupies a structurally analogous position in a rule-based order: it is the power whose cooperation the system requires, and therefore both the ultimate guarantor of the rules and the power most capable of violating them. This structural position generates characteristic pressures toward unilateralism, toward the conflation of American interests with universal principles, and toward the perception by others that the rules are instruments of American domination rather than genuinely universal norms.

Murphy offers the most candid assessment of the analogy’s limits. He acknowledges freely that Rome and America are very different places, separated by time, scale, circumstance, and the very nature of the modern world. The United States exists in a world of sovereign nation-states with a developed international legal order, a world without precedent in Roman experience. Rome cannot tell us how such a system responds to hegemonic overreach, because Rome never had to operate within one. What it can do, Murphy suggests, is sensitize us to the kinds of structural pressures that tend to accumulate within large, successful, complex polities: the privatization of public functions, the widening gap between military

⁴²²Heather and Rapley, *Why Empires Fall*, introduction and chap. 1; Watts, *Eternal Decline*, 197–220.

⁴²³*Ibid.*, 1–2.

and citizens, the erosion of the fiscal foundations of public investment, the difficulty of sustaining the values that self-governance requires.⁴²⁴ These pressures are not Roman inventions; they are features of political life that Rome experienced, described vividly, and transmitted to posterity as diagnostic categories through which later civilizations have learned to read their own condition. The virtue of the Rome is not that it predicts the American future but that it provides a set of structurally analogous cases through which present tendencies can be seen more clearly.

Conclusion

The texts examined in this chapter collectively demonstrate both the power and the peril of the Roman example as a framework for understanding American power. Their sophistication lies precisely in their awareness of this double character: they use Rome as a mirror not because they believe the American reflection it returns is perfectly accurate, but because the distortions of the mirror are themselves revealing. As this thesis has traced from Machiavelli through Gibbon to Napoleon and beyond, every age has read Rome in the light of its own preoccupations and found in the Roman precedent what it needed to think through its own dilemmas. The early-twenty-first-century American reading is no exception: the triumphalists find a model of the benefits of imperial order; the declinists find a warning about the costs of overreach; and the more nuanced analysts (Murphy, Ferguson, James, and now Heather and Rapley) find a set of structural dynamics that resist reduction to either pole.⁴²⁵

The question of whether the United States will follow Rome into decline is, of course, unanswerable in the terms the analogy itself suggests. History does not simply repeat itself, and the specific combination of factors that produced

⁴²⁴Murphy, *Are We Rome?*, 48–68; Watts, *Eternal Decline*, 1–9, 197–220.

⁴²⁵Heather and Rapley, *Why Empires Fall*, conclusion; Ferguson, *Colossus*, 286–304.

Roman decline⁴²⁶ has no precise modern equivalent. What the analogy can do, as these authors variously suggest, is provide a framework for identifying the generic features of hegemonic vulnerability: the tendency of success to breed complacency, of power to breed corruption, of prosperity to erode the public responsibility that made prosperity possible, and of dominance to transform the world in ways the dominant power then fails to accommodate. These are not specifically Roman pathologies; they are features of political life that Rome experienced early, described vividly, and bequeathed to posterity as categories through which later civilizations have learned to read their own condition.⁴²⁷

Harold James's formulation of the "Roman predicament" captures the essential insight with characteristic precision: the very process by which they create and maintain international order tends to generate the conditions of their own undoing. The rule-based order a hegemon builds to sustain its dominance creates expectations of legitimacy and universality it cannot always meet; the resulting perception of hypocrisy erodes the soft power that underpins informal hegemony; and the consequent demand for enforcement creates pressures toward the exercise of hard power that further erodes legitimacy. This spiral is the Roman dilemma, and it is the American dilemma, and it is the dilemma of any hegemonic power in any international system complex enough to generate genuine expectations of rule-governed behavior.⁴²⁸

The Roman example is hardly ever only a historical comparison: it is a political act, an intervention in present debates conducted through the medium of the past. In the hands of the authors cited above, it is simultaneously a diagnostic tool, a political argument, and a mirror in which American power, for all its unprecedented scale and sophistication, confronts the oldest questions of political life: what makes great powers durable, what makes them brittle, and what choices,

⁴²⁶The demographic pressures of the migration period, the fiscal incapacity of the late imperial state, the climatic and epidemiological shocks that Kyle Harper has reconstructed, the particular cultural dynamics of a polytheistic civilization encountering a universalist monotheism.

⁴²⁷Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*; cf. Murphy, *Are We Rome?*, 25–26, and Watts, *Eternal Decline*, 215–220.

⁴²⁸James, *The Roman Predicament*, 1–5, 141–159 (conclusion).

made in the present, will determine which of these descriptions applies to the civilization that inhabits the Potomac basin two centuries hence. That the mirror should distort as much as it reflects is not a defect of the analogy; it is, as this thesis has sought to show across the full sweep of the tradition from Machiavelli to the present, precisely the source of its enduring power.

Conclusion

This thesis began with a puzzle: that an empire which vanished from the West more than fifteen centuries ago has never stopped being argued about, and that regimes with almost nothing else in common have reached, again and again, for the same ancient referent. Having followed Rome from the study of the exiled Machiavelli to the anxieties of post-9/11 Washington, it is now possible to answer the questions with which the inquiry opened—why Rome endures as the privileged analogue of empire, how different actors select different Romes, and what this recurrence reveals about the place of the past in international political thought.

The centrality of Latin and of classical education in the formation of European and American elites ensured that Rome, and not Assyria, Persia, or the Mongols, furnished the shared vocabulary in which the politically literate thought about power. But the deeper reason is internal to the Roman material itself. Rome endures as an imperial mirror because its source tradition is uniquely multi-vocal and uniquely well documented. An empire with a thinner or more univocal record offers fewer footholds; one cannot easily make the Mongols argue both for and against empire, for expansion and for restraint, for liberty and for hierarchy. Rome can be made to do all of these things because Roman and Greek writers, arguing among themselves about the meaning of their own constitutional catastrophe, had already done all of them.⁴²⁹ The plasticity documented in these chapters is therefore not a modern imposition upon Rome but the continuation of an argument that Rome began.

To the second question, *how and why different actors select different Romes*, the case studies have given a consistent answer: the selection is systematic, and it tracks the legitimating task each actor faces and the position he occupies within the international order of his day. There is no single Rome on offer, but a

⁴²⁹ On the multi-vocality of the ancient sources as the precondition of Rome's later versatility, see Alain M. Gowing, *Empire and Memory: The Representation of the Roman Republic in Imperial Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), and Daniel J. Kapust, *Republicanism, Rhetoric, and Roman Political Thought: Sallust, Livy, and Tacitus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

repertoire, and each actor retrieves the part that serves the present. Machiavelli recovered the expansionist republic, in which internal liberty and external conquest reinforce one another, as a model for a Florence threatened by foreign arms.⁴³⁰ Gibbon, writing at the height of British expansion, converted Rome into a *trajectory* of decline and so made empire itself a problem for secular, rational inquiry.⁴³¹ Napoleon fashioned from Roman materials a Caesarist sovereignty that closed the revolutionary cycle while preserving its gains; the Victorians retrieved the civilizing imperium that recast the rule of distant peoples as the gift of law and order; and the United States, finally, summoned a cautionary Rome whose decline became a warning against its own overreach.

That these retrievals could be not merely different but mutually contradictory is shown most starkly by the totalitarian case. Fascism and National Socialism, so often bracketed together as a single “cult of antiquity,” in fact drew incompatible lessons from the same imperial history: where Fascist *romanità* celebrated Rome’s assimilative universality and its fusion of many peoples under one law, National Socialism identified precisely that universality as the racial poison that had killed the empire.⁴³² Two regimes routinely treated as kin thus read opposite destinies in the same mirror: the clearest possible demonstration that Rome supplies not a fixed model but a kit of parts, and that what an actor sees in it is governed by what he needs it to mean.

These findings converge on the answer to the governing question: Rome has functioned in modern and contemporary political thought as a political myth in the service of international order. Beneath the diversity of its uses, the same

⁴³⁰ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); on the imperial dimension, Mikael Hörnqvist, *Machiavelli and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁴³¹ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. David Womersley (London: Penguin, 1994); for the intellectual context, J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, Vol. 1: *The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon, 1737–1764* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁴³² On these divergent appropriations, see Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, trans. Keith Botsford (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), and Johann Chapoutot, *Greeks, Romans, Germans: How the Nazis Usurped Europe’s Classical Past*, trans. Richard R. Nybakken (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

three legitimating operations recur across five centuries and across regimes as different as a Renaissance republic and a racial state: the naturalization of expansion, the reframing of hierarchy as order, and the sanctification of foundational violence. Each is an operation upon the international, and the constancy of this repertoire, despite radical differences of period, ideology, and intent, is itself the strongest evidence that what is at work is myth rather than analysis. A genuinely analytical use of the past would yield conclusions as various as the cases; a mythic one returns, beneath every variation, to the same handful of operations.

This is why the history traced here is not one of progressive enlightenment, in which crude early uses give way to sophisticated later ones. The contemporary American essayist who invokes Rome to warn against imperial overstretch is, structurally, a near relation of those who once invoked it to justify empire, even though the mood has inverted from celebration to foreboding. Harold James's "Roman predicament", the recognition that the very order a hegemon builds to sustain its dominance generates the conditions of its own undoing, is the latest, most self-aware turn of the mirror, but it is a turn of the same mirror.⁴³³ What endures is not a particular lesson but the reflex of looking, and the recurrence of the operations performed once one has looked.

To study the political uses of Rome is therefore to study a substantial part of the conceptual equipment with which the modern West has thought about power, hierarchy, and decline among nations. The Roman analogy belongs to international political thought, because the claims it underwrites (about the right to rule others, the direction of imperial order, and the life cycles of great powers) are claims about the international itself. To reach for Rome has been a political act conducted through the medium of the past, a way of borrowing antiquity's prestige

⁴³³ Harold James, *The Roman Predicament: How the Rules of International Order Create the Politics of Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); for the broader genealogy of the decline frame, Edward J. Watts, *The Eternal Decline and Fall of Rome: The History of a Dangerous Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

to make the contingent appear natural, the hierarchical appear orderly, and the violent appear sacred.

The governing image of this thesis was that of the mirror, and the metaphor has proved exact. Those who look to Rome have consistently found their own features reflected back, magnified and ennobled by antiquity; Rome becomes, in Cullen Murphy's phrase, "the eagle in the mirror."⁴³⁴ That the mirror distorts as much as it reflects is not a defect of the analogy but the very source of its enduring power: a faithful record would constrain its users, whereas a malleable myth liberates them. As long as power must be made to appear legitimate, and as long as the West continues to school itself in the memory of Rome, the eagle will go on finding its reflection there, and the historian's task will remain that of distinguishing what the mirror shows from what its users have placed before it.

⁴³⁴ Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2008).

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