

The Roman Empire

A Beginner's Guide

Philip Matyszak



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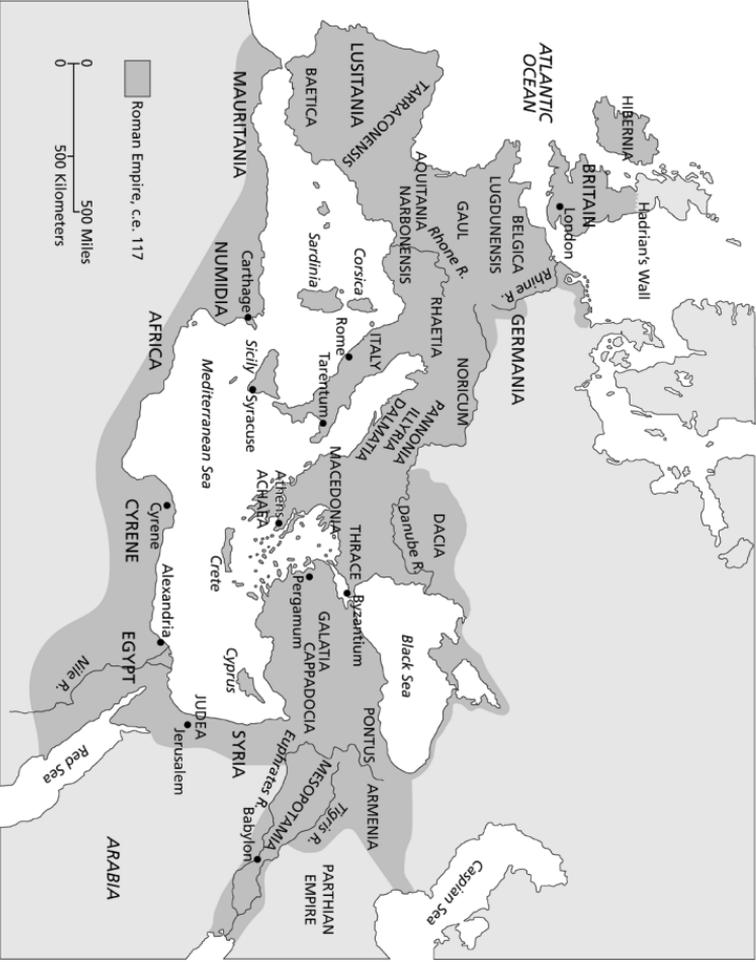
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Introduction

In 612 BCE, a great empire came to an end. At its height the Assyrian Empire had dominated Asia Minor, ruled Egypt and established provinces deep in what is today Iran. Yet its end was dramatic and bloody. A confederation of subject peoples, led by the city-state of Babylon, fell upon Nineveh, Assyria's capital city. When Nineveh fell, the empire's vengeful former vassals took the city apart brick by brick and massacred the inhabitants. Assyria's empire was snuffed out and Nineveh lay abandoned and desolate for centuries.

The Assyrians, as had all conquerors before them, had made a clear distinction between conquerors and conquered: the conquered served the conquerors and existed on their sufferance. At the time no one paid much attention to an almost unprecedented development far away on the barbaric western fringe of the known world. The small city-state of Rome, founded some 150 years before Nineveh's fall, chose a radical new approach. Rome had a desperate shortage of manpower and an abundance of enemies, so the little state (only about forty kilometres across at the time) either had to attempt innovative measures or be overwhelmed by the more numerous, and highly predatory, cities and tribes of central Italy.

Rome's response was typically pragmatic: if Rome lacked resources, the solution was to have more Rome. The city became aggressively expansionist. While Assyria was being demolished by subjects who were not Assyrian and had never felt Assyrian, Roman tradition tells us that King Tarquin the Elder was conquering the people of Apiolae. (Conquest of the cities of Camerina,

Corniculum and Nomentum soon followed.) However, Tarquin made the conquered people not Roman *subjects* but Roman *citizens*. Rome had made a conceptual breakthrough: the citizens of a city need not live in that city. They could live hundreds of kilometres away, be active in the affairs of a city that they and their families regarded as home, yet still be Roman citizens. In time, these new Roman citizens became the equals of their conqueror; not merely loyal subjects but as Roman in thought and deed as anyone born on Rome's seven hills.

As Rome expanded to become an Italian and then a Mediterranean power, the innate conservatism of later Romans meant that they were slow to abandon the policies of their ancestors. More and more conquered peoples were absorbed into the Roman state as Romans. The city of Arpinum, in Latium, was captured by Rome in 305 BCE and its inhabitants immediately made citizens, although not given the vote. (Full suffrage was granted in 188 BCE.) Caius Marius, a native of Arpinum, became consul of Rome several times over and led Roman armies to victory in Africa and Gaul. In 63 BCE, another Arpinate, Marcus Tullius Cicero, became consul of Rome, never thinking of himself as anything but a fully Roman citizen.

By the time of the first Roman emperors, conquest by absorption had become an explicit doctrine. The historian Tacitus (in *Annals* 11.24) records this speech made by the emperor Claudius in 48 CE:

What ruined Sparta and Athens, but this? They were mighty in war, but they rejected as aliens those whom they had conquered. Totally different was our father Romulus, who in his wisdom fought [the people of] several nations as enemies and then greeted them as fellow-citizens, all on the same day. We have been ruled by foreigners. The sons of freed slaves have been trusted with public office. And do not think this is something new in our time - it was common practice of old ... Now they are united with

us in culture, education and intermarriage, let them bring us their gold and their wealth rather than enjoying it by themselves.

The Mediterranean world became a vast social experiment. From the Thames to the Tigris, peoples, who a few generations before had been only vaguely aware of each other's existence, were now united as members of a single empire. Over the next five hundred years these peoples came together in religion, language and culture to form a society that largely still exists today. Westerners find Rome in their vocabulary (such as in the word 'romance'), in the architecture of their civic buildings and in the political and legal structures that govern their daily lives.

The contrast with Assyria could not be more dramatic. When the Roman Empire in the west collapsed in the fifth century CE, the peoples of the Greek east did not join in the assault on Rome, nor did they wish to eradicate the empire. They had no interest in throwing off the shackles of Roman oppression, because they had become Romans. The emperor in the Greek east still consulted his senate, chariots continued to race in the circus and the laws of Rome remained the law of the land. For another thousand years, Rome's empire lived on among the peoples the city had conquered.

How this came to be is the story told in this book. The story of how one kind of Roman empire, an empire ruled by Romans, became a completely different kind of Roman empire: an empire *of* Romans. This story focuses not on the city of Rome, not on the antics of the imperial court, nor even on the many wars which Rome fought with neighbouring states. Instead, its emphasis lies on the provinces which made up the empire. There, a slow sea-change took sullen, conquered peoples and made them contributors to and partners in a civilisation so dynamic and vibrant that it survived the collapse of Roman military and civic power to become the foundation of the Europe we know today.

1

Rome in the Republic: an empire without an emperor

Rome conquered most of the lands that made up its empire while the state was still a republic. Almost from the time it was founded, the Roman state began absorbing neighbouring peoples and cities. As Rome grew stronger, more resources became available for military operations and the pace of conquest accelerated. During the later years of the Republic it was not unusual for several kingdoms to fall under Roman control in a single year. Though there were substantial additions in the imperial period, it is fair to say that by the time Augustus became Rome's first emperor, much of Rome's empire was largely in place. Under Augustus, the limits of Roman power lay at the waters of the Euphrates River in the east and at the beaches of Gaul in the west.

Between these two points, four thousand kilometres apart, was an empire of millions of people, living in hundreds of cities, in environments that ranged from desert sands and mountains to pine forests and bogs. All that the subjects of Rome's growing empire had in common was that they had submitted to the power of the Roman legions. In religion, architecture, art, language, society and culture, the peoples of Rome's new empire were considerably more different from each other than they were from their neighbours just beyond the frontier.

When Augustus became Rome's first emperor in 31 BCE, few of the natives of the provinces he ruled thought of themselves as

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Romans. With the passing of the centuries, much would change. A time would come when the city of Rome was not the centre of imperial government; and eventually the empire would be divided. The peoples of the east would continue to call themselves 'Roman' long after Rome had fallen to the barbarians. Between the reigns of Rome's first and last emperors a slow fusion of Latin, Greek and Gallic cultures took place. The physical conquest of the Mediterranean world was only the first stage in the creation of a truly Roman empire; an empire which would, largely, remain even when the bonds of political and military control had fallen away. This chapter examines how Rome came to master the Mediterranean world and how the government coped with the challenge of ruling what was originally a hugely diverse mass of peoples. Understanding the empire of the Caesars requires us to understand the Republican empire from which it evolved and an understanding of the institutions of the Republic that the Caesars usurped.

Acquiring an empire

Who among men is so ignorant or lazy that he does not want to know how and by what sort of government almost everything in the world was conquered and fell under the sole rule of the Romans?

Introductory remarks by Polybius, *History* 1.1.5

The origins of the city of Rome are shrouded in the mists of legend. Whatever details of this legend may be disputed, no one denies that, once the city had been founded some time in the eighth century BCE, the Romans had to fight for their existence. It is significant that in the foundation legend Romulus' first act was to build a defensive wall. The Romans expected to be attacked and they were. The new city arose at the lowest

bridgeable (or fordable) point of the Tiber, sitting squarely across an already ancient trade route. This was the *via Salaria*, which, as its name suggests, was the route by which salt was carried from the salt flats of the coast to the Italian interior.

Romulus and Remus

The legend of Rome's most famous twins tells us much of how the Romans saw themselves and their origins. The mother of the twins was Rhea Silva, a member of the royal family of the city of Alba Longa, who was made a Vestal Virgin by a usurping relative. This move was meant to prevent Rhea from having children, so when she became pregnant this meant her execution. Some forms of the legend claim that the king deliberately raped Rhea, wearing a helmet to avoid being recognised.

If so, the plan backfired, because Rhea deftly claimed that the father of the twins was the war god, Mars himself. This idea gained enough popular support to save Rhea's life but the king ordered the newborn children to be thrown into the swollen river Tiber. A kindly servant put the twins into a basket. When this floated ashore, the pair were found and suckled by a she-wolf who had lost her cubs. Adopted later by a shepherd, the pair grew up unaware of their origins. When they did discover their royal birth, they marched on Alba Longa and overthrew the usurper king. However, the twins decided to found a city of their own.

The site was the subject of debate. Eventually, Romulus had his way and began building walls on the Palatine hill. When Remus mocked his efforts by vaulting the earthworks, he was slain by a furious Romulus. Once his city was established, Romulus ruled as king. At the end of his rule, he mysteriously vanished – either taken up to the heavens as a god, or killed by senators, who smuggled away his body parts under their togas.

This story shows the Romans having their cake and eating it. Their origins are noble – a princess and a god – but simultaneously humble; shepherd boys possibly raised by a prostitute (*lupa* means either she-wolf or prostitute). The birth of Rome is both divinely ordained and founded on blood and murder. Finally, Romulus either became a god (worshipped as Quirinus) or was justly assassinated for his increasingly despotic ways. So the Romans could claim both to have started from nothing, and also with divine and noble origins.

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Furthermore, Rome was founded on the border between Latium and Etruria and relations between the Latins and Etruscans were generally fraught and often violent. Add marauding hill tribes and the fact that Rome had annexed the Capitoline Hill (which was already a site of considerable religious significance) and it becomes clear that the Romans could expect to do even more fighting than the considerable amount customary for contemporary Italian city-states.

Rome developed a warrior culture 'strong and disciplined by the lessons of war' as Livy puts it (1.21.5). Legend records wars with the neighbouring Sabine and Latin peoples and also conflicts with the nearby cities of Fidenae and Veii. Archaeology and legend alike strongly suggest a period of Etruscan dominance, though it should be remembered that like the Greeks, the Etruscans lived in city-states that fought each other as much as their external enemies. Even Etruscan-dominated Rome probably allocated part of the campaigning season to fighting Etruscans.

The militaristic culture of Rome developed alongside Rome itself. This warlike ethos was to remain dominant well after the end of the Republic. A linked trend – and another key factor in the development of Rome – was that from the very beginning Rome was relentlessly expansionist. Legend tells us that Rome accepted refugees, men fleeing justice and escaped slaves in equal measure, kidnapping wives for them from the neighbouring Sabine tribe. The historical record concurs; by the time fact becomes distinct from legend, the coastal city of Ostia was already Roman, the Sabine people had been assimilated and a number of adjoining cities, possibly including Alba Longa, Rome's mother-city, had been conquered. Often, the populations of these conquered cities were forcibly translocated to Rome.

When Tarquin the Proud, Rome's last king, was expelled in 508 BCE, Rome was a tidy but relatively small city state at most fifty kilometres in breadth. It was possible for a man fighting

The seven kings of Rome

Romulus	763–716 BCE
Numa Pompilius	716–674 BCE
Tullus Hostilius	674–642 BCE
Ancus Martius	641–617 BCE
Tarquin the elder	617–579 BCE
Servius Tullius	579–535 BCE
Tarquin the Proud	535–508 BCE

The number seven was highly symbolic in the classical world: there were seven wonders, seven sages and of course seven hills of Rome (which could easily have been any number from five to twelve, depending how one counts the protrusions of the volcanic ridge that makes up the Quirinal, Viminal and Esquiline hills).

Historians are sceptical about how many of these kings existed. The kings of Rome may have been real figures who coincidentally numbered seven, or completely fictional characters. The topic is hotly debated between 'literalist' historians, who generally accept the Roman tradition and 'hyper-criticals', who feel all Roman history before the first Punic war of 264 BCE is basically invented.

on the border by day to ride home to his wife in Rome at night. This is demonstrated by a contemporary story in which a group of noblemen, part of the army besieging the city of Ardea, had nothing to do one afternoon and 'galloped off to Rome, where they arrived as darkness was beginning to close in' (Livy 1.57.8–9).

The next century saw steady expansion, but not until 396 BCE did Rome conquer the Etruscan city of Veii, sixteen kilometres away; a city so close it is today in the suburbs of modern Rome. From this point, Rome's rise to empire truly began, yet the incentive appears to have been not victory over the Etruscans but a crushing defeat by the Gauls, probably in 387 BCE. The Gauls were an expansionist people, who had migrated over the Alps more than a century earlier. After defeating the Romans in

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battle they occupied the city, though Roman legend insists that the Capitoline Hill remained unconquered. The Gauls did not remain in Rome and their invasion was equally devastating to nearby cities and tribes.

The disciplined Romans, with their militaristic culture, recovered fastest. They drove off the marauding Gallic army and went on to occupy towns and territories enfeebled by invasion and sack. Unlike the Gauls, the Romans had no intention of abandoning their conquests. A generation after the Gallic sack, Rome had occupied much of Latium and was contending with the Samnite peoples for control of the prosperous cities of Capua and Cumae, almost two hundred kilometres away. By 282 BCE, Rome had defeated the Samnites and the Etruscans, who were then in league with them.

The Romans founded a number of military colonies to control the regions they had conquered. Then, to facilitate the rapid movement of their armies, they began constructing the network of roads which was eventually to bind together the Mediterranean world. Significantly, the military colonies quickly became thriving cities in their own right and so considerable numbers of 'Romans' lived their lives without ever seeing Rome.

The growing size of the Roman state attracted the interest of the much larger and predatory Hellenistic kingdoms to the east. In 280 BCE, the Greek cities of southern Italy, made uncomfortable by the power and expansionist tendencies of Rome, appealed to King Pyrrhus of Epirus for support. Much to the astonishment of the Greek world, Pyrrhus and his army of tens of thousands of pikemen were fought to a standstill by the Romans. Pyrrhus won his battles, but at the cost of a crippled army (whence comes the term 'pyrrhic victory') and he was forced to withdraw. The defeat of one of the finest generals and armies in the known world marked Rome's arrival as an international power possessing all Italy south of the River Po.

Rise to empire

It was reported that two consular armies had been lost, that Hannibal was master of Italy ... Surely any other people would have been overwhelmed by the scale of so massive a disaster. When you compare this with other calamities ... the only similarity is that they were endured with less fortitude.

Livy on the aftermath of Roman defeat at
Cannae 216 BCE

For most of the remainder of the third century BCE, Rome was locked in a protracted and draining struggle with Carthage, the city which had previously been the dominant power in the western Mediterranean. Rome fought two major wars with Carthage: the first between 264 and 241 BCE and the second between 218 and 201 BCE. The first war was fought mainly in the seas about Sicily, temporarily making Rome a naval power. With its greater resources, Rome outlasted Carthage, which was forced to sue for peace. Victory left Rome in possession of Sicily and command of the seas in the west. Both conquests were to be retained for the next seven hundred years.

The legend of Atilius Regulus

During the first war with Carthage, Regulus led a Roman invasion of Africa. The invasion was a failure and Regulus was captured by the Carthaginians. The war was a drain on Carthage's resources, so Regulus was released to bear peace terms to the Roman senate. Regulus' release was conditional on the senate actually making peace; if not, Regulus was bound by oath to return to imprisonment.

As promised, Regulus delivered the peace terms. He then argued powerfully in favour of Rome continuing the war and prosecuting it more vigorously. As promised, Regulus then went back to Carthage, knowing he would be horribly punished for his actions, as indeed he was. His bravery and dedication to the state was held as a model for later generations to follow.

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In the inter-war years, Rome annexed Sardinia from Carthage. This move was partly why a leading Carthaginian family, the Barcids, came to believe that a further war with Rome was inevitable. Hasdrubal Barca was the leading Carthaginian general of the first Punic war, who, according to the later historian Polybius, passed his hatred of Rome to his son, Hannibal. Hannibal spent much of his youth in Spain where Carthage was carving out new dominions. (The name of the modern Spanish city of Cartagena comes from the Latin *Carthago Nova*, which in turn comes from the Punic *Quart-Hadasht* 'New Carthage'.) Rome also had interests in Spain and secured a passage to Iberia by taking its first province outside Italy. This was originally called Gallia Transalpina but was often referred to simply as 'the Province' (hence its modern name of Provence). With tensions rising between the Romans and Carthaginians in Spain, Hannibal attacked the city of Saguntum. This city was allied to Rome, so the attack was effectively a declaration of war. Then, without waiting for a Roman response, Hannibal attacked Italy from the north.

Cannae - Rome's greatest defeat

After two defeats by Hannibal, the Romans decided on a change of strategy. Hannibal's army was disciplined and experienced but relatively small. Therefore, Rome would crush the Carthaginians by sheer weight of numbers. Levies of Roman and Italian manpower raised almost 100,000 men, the largest army ever assembled by the Republic. Hannibal's army was around half that size although his cavalry was both more numerous and more experienced: a factor which was to prove decisive.

Rather than avoid Rome's massive army, Hannibal sought battle. He also took the unusual step of using his weaker Gallic and Spanish troops to bear the brunt of the first Roman assault. The battle began with the Carthaginians chasing off the cavalry that guarded the Roman army's flanks. When the legions then hit the front ranks of Hannibal's army, the Gauls and Spaniards gave ground but did not break.

Once the mass of Roman troops was embedded in the body of his army, Hannibal ordered his Libyan troops to close in on the flanks. At the same time the Carthaginian cavalry hit the Romans from behind. The Romans were enveloped and packed so tightly that their greater numbers were useless. Some seventy thousand men were cut down on the Roman side for the loss of about eight thousand of Hannibal's men.

This disaster destroyed the Roman army as a fighting force; overall it is estimated that one in every three contemporary adult Roman males died in the Hannibalic war.

Hannibal intended to invade by way of the Po valley. Doing this necessitated taking his army, including elephants, on an epic journey across the Alps. His arrival in Italy presented the Romans with the most severe challenge to their nascent empire since the Gallic sack of Rome in the late fourth century. In 218 BCE, Hannibal won a close battle at Trebia, then wiped out a Roman army in an ambush at Lake Trasimene in 217. Finally, Hannibal's army crushed the Romans at Cannae, in 216 BCE. Though the defeat at Cannae rocked Rome to the foundations, Rome's Italian allies mostly stayed loyal. Under Rome's 'shield' – General Quintus Fabius, also known as 'the delayer' – Rome slowly rebuilt its strength. Hannibal was contained in southern Italy while Rome dedicated its military resources to the conquest of Spain. Driven from Spain, the Carthaginian army attempted to unite with Hannibal in Italy, but was defeated. Finally, a Roman army under Scipio Africanus landed in North Africa, forcing Hannibal to leave Italy to defend Carthage. Badly outnumbered and facing a skilled and experienced general, Hannibal was defeated at Zama in 202 BCE. Carthage surrendered soon after.

Rome emerged from the conflict with increased territory in northern Italy and mastery of Spain, although the Iberian tribes disputed this for the next two centuries. Despite its war-weary populace, the senate barely paused before launching Rome into another ambitious overseas war, this time against Philip V of

Macedon. Philip had opportunistically declared war on Rome after Cannae but fighting in Greece had been desultory and Rome's Aetolian allies had borne the brunt of it. Most of the action had taken place in and about a Roman protectorate in western Greece that had been established to suppress Illyrian piracy in the Adriatic. The Romans and Macedonians had soon realised that the war was a pointless waste of resources and made peace.

Then in 201 BCE Rome launched a full-scale invasion. The ostensible reason was to free Greece from Macedonian clutches, but the more probable cause was the mistaken fear that Macedon might ally with Seleucia or Ptolemaic Egypt against Rome. Both Seleucia and Egypt vastly outmatched the Romans in manpower and financial resources. However, as the Romans proved in their war with Philip V, the quality of Rome's legions was unsurpassed. The decisive battle was fought at Cynoscephalae in 197 BCE. The Roman legions of Quintus Flaminius soundly defeated the Macedonian phalanx. After the victory, Flaminius declared Rome content at having wrested Greece from Macedonian control and the Greek city states were left to govern themselves.

However, control of Greece was an ambition of all the Hellenic powers. With Macedon defeated, Antiochus III of Seleucia attempted to fill the power vacuum in Greece by invading from the east, despite stern warnings from the Romans to stay away. The Romans backed their warnings with military force; Antiochus was defeated at Thermopylae in 191 BCE and driven from Greece. To the Seleucid king's surprise the Romans followed up their success by attacking him in his own dominions the following year. The battle of Magnesia broke the power of the Seleucid empire which thereafter went into a slow but irreversible decline. From the Roman perspective, the wars against the Hellenistic powers were pre-emptive but defensive, so they neither followed up their victories nor expanded their empire eastward.

Even after a third war with Macedon, in which the nascent power of Philip V's successor Perseus was crushed at the battle

of Pydna in 168 BCE, Rome was content not to hold territory but remain as the hegemonic power in Greece. Yet Rome was growing both more arrogant and more secure as the dominant power in the Mediterranean. The city tolerated neither the regained strength of Carthage nor the constant petty wars in Greece. When Rome defeated a Macedonian uprising by an anti-Roman king, Macedon became a Roman province. While they were about it the Romans declared war on the Achaean League, then the dominant power in Greece and crushed it in a one-sided campaign. In the same year, 146 BCE, Rome sacked and utterly destroyed Carthage and horrified the Greek world by meting out almost the same treatment to the ancient city of Corinth.

From 133 BCE, internal political strife wracked the increasingly dysfunctional political system of the Republic; but political turmoil within Rome served only to drive faster expansion. Also in 133, King Attalus of Pergamon died, leaving his rich kingdom to Rome. (Pergamon was one of the many states that had arisen from the former lands of the shrinking Seleucid Empire.) The tax revenues from their new acquisition increased Roman interest in the financial possibilities of empire. Iberia, with its silver mines, had the potential to be equally profitable but Roman misgovernment had kept the region in such disorder that the cost of suppressing repeated rebellions outweighed the gains from tax revenue.

The beginning of the first century BCE saw Rome on the defensive against a Germanic people, the Cimbri. The Cimbri were a migratory people, who had wandered northern Europe for almost a century. Allied with the Teutons and other tribes they turned southward to threaten Italy. An early attempt to head off the invasion led to a Roman army being wiped out in Gaul, but fortunately for Rome the invaders turned aside from the Alps. When the migrant tribesmen returned the Roman army was ready. It was led by Caius Marius, a demagogic politician but a dogged and skilled general who had played a pivotal role

in winning Numidia from the renegade King Jugurtha a few years earlier. To win his campaign in Africa Marius had made far-reaching changes to the Roman army, which included new forms of recruitment, training and military formations. These proved highly successful in campaigns against the Germanic tribes and Marius was elected to command the army year after year.

Expansion in the age of the dynasts

The Romans are the common enemy of mankind, most vicious where the loot is greatest. By audacity and deceit, leapfrogging from war to war, they have grown great. They will destroy humanity, or perish in the process.

To the king of Parthia from the king of Pontus
Sallust Letter of Mithridates 1.20

Rome's expansion to empire followed an exponential curve. Modest resources had resulted in modest gains; Rome's genius lay in assimilating those gains so comprehensively that within a few generations the people of occupied lands in Italy considered themselves Roman. With conquered peoples fully subscribed to the Roman project, the resources for further conquest were that much greater.

Who were the dynasts?

A 'dynast' in Greek is 'one who is able to do something'. This term rapidly came to mean 'able to rule', whence our modern word 'dynasty'. The 'age of the Dynasts' is often used instead of the term 'Late Republic' to reflect that after 88 BCE Rome was effectively ruled by a succession of strongmen who had near-monarchical powers.

However, these dynasts were not autocrats, because their power was bitterly disputed, both by the senate and by high-ranking families ambitious for their members to become dynasts themselves. On two occasions three dynasts banded together to rule the state as what the writer Varro called 'a three-headed monster'. The first of these 'triumvirates' was an informal pact that linked Julius Caesar, Crassus and Pompey. The second was a formally instituted quasi-constitutional office in which Lepidus, Mark Antony and Octavian divided the empire among them.

The power struggles between the dynasts and their opponents effectively destroyed what remained of the Republican constitution. When the empire was established, it was in effect a military dictatorship, yet the reaction of the common people was not outrage but relief that the political turbulence of the previous era had ended.

However, after the Punic wars Rome was sparing in granting citizenship to conquered nations and a social and legal divide grew between Romans and provincials. Consequently even as the last years of the Republic saw the borders of Rome's empire expanding chaos and civil war took root at home. By this time Rome had huge resources and an economy at least in part funded by the proceeds of conquest. Also the militaristic culture of Rome inseparably linked political success with military glory. These two forces created a dynamic that forced the Roman Republic into a final surge of conquest even as the political structure of the Republic was collapsing. The first signs of this collapse were visible by 133 when a far-sighted tribune, Tiberius Gracchus, attempted to deal with the two dominant problems facing Rome – a decline in the number of peasant farmers, who had once been the backbone of the legions and the dangerous and growing disaffection of the non-Roman peoples of Italy.

The decline in the number of Roman smallholders available for recruitment into the army was compensated by Marius' change to the rules, allowing those without significant property to join the legions. However, the selfish and short-sighted

Roman nobility did nothing about the resentment felt by the people of Italy towards Roman arrogance and injustice. The Italians appealed for Roman citizenship not from love of Rome but because Roman citizens had legal protection against abuses denied to the Italians. When proposed legislation to grant citizenship to many Italians failed (and the tribune proposing the law was murdered) in 91 BCE, the Italians responded by declaring war on Rome.

The war lasted for over two years. It was called the Social War (from the Latin *socii*, 'allies') and is perhaps the only recorded case of the opposite of a war of independence. The Italians wanted to become Roman and were prepared to destroy Rome if they were denied citizenship. The Italians had the same armour, training and tactics as the Romans, so the Social War was very close to a civil war. In effect, Rome lost that war: the senate backed down and the Roman people agreed to grant citizenship to anyone who would stop fighting them to get it. This broke the back of the rebellion, though some diehard Samnite tribes continued to fight for the total obliteration of Rome.

Even before the flames of the Social War had died out in 88 BCE, another huge war broke out in the east. Pontus, like Pergamon, was a kingdom that had grown from the ruins of the Seleucid Empire in Asia Minor. Under King Mithridates VI, Pontus had expanded to include substantial domains around the Black Sea. Pontus was immensely rich; but in their eagerness to provoke war and get those riches the corrupt and greedy Roman officials in Asia Minor forgot that Pontus was also immensely well-armed. Mithridates swept the Romans aside and went on to conquer all Asia Minor, helped by the hatred of the people there for Rome's brutal and extortionist tax gatherers. Indeed, once he had conquered Asia Minor, Mithridates ordered the execution of all Latin-speakers in his realm and the vengeful peoples of Asia Minor massacred eighty thousand Romans and Italians in a single day.

Though nearly bankrupt, Rome raised an army to confront Mithridates. Command of that army went to the consul Cornelius Sulla, but amid scenes of rioting, political chaos and near-anarchy in Rome, Caius Marius used his political allies to transfer the command to himself. As his army remained loyal, Sulla marched his men into Rome where he forcibly restored order and exiled Marius before leading the army to Greece, which Mithridates had wrested from Roman control. Sulla's action set a precedent. No Roman general had ever before turned his troops against the senate and people of the city; and previously no troops would have followed a commander who did so. However, Sulla's army included new Italian citizens who had fought against Rome only two years before. Others (thanks to the Marian reforms) had no land to retire to when they were discharged. Therefore, they looked to their commander to see that they were suitably rewarded once their period of service ended. In short, for the first time, but emphatically not the last, Rome was confronted by an army more loyal to its commander than to Rome.

After Sulla had departed for Greece to campaign against Mithridates, his enemies rapidly regained power. Marius returned to Rome and began a bloody purge of Sulla's supporters. However, he could do nothing about Sulla himself, for Roman armies were fully capable of supporting themselves in the field without money or supplies from home. Consequently, though outlawed Sulla was able to reconquer Greece, force Mithridates into submission and then lead his army of very experienced veterans to reconquer Rome in a short but vicious civil war. A young volunteer general, Gnaeus Pompey, joined forces with Sulla; while Sulla took vengeance, with interest, on Marius' supporters Pompey reclaimed Africa from Marian control. Iberia was a tougher nut to crack as the Marian general there was the highly competent Sertorius. With the help of loyal tribesmen and his own rebel Romans, Sertorius fought the legions to a standstill but once Sertorius had been assassinated, Pompey easily defeated Sertorius' subordinates.