

The Roman Empire: introducing some key terms



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Introduction

This course introduces key terms that are essential for understanding the Classical Roman world.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 3 study in [Arts and Humanities](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the terminology associated with the culture, identity and power relevant to the Roman Empire, as treated both in ancient sources and modern scholarship and presentation.

1 Preliminary exercise

Before you start work on this course, please watch the video sequence 'Introducing the Roman World' below. This visual introduction will introduce many of the terms to be defined in this course and set them in context. It will also show the kinds of sources you might work on for evidence of culture, identity and power in the Roman Empire if you continue to study this topic. You may wish to replay this short sequence as you work on the course, but for now enjoy looking at the wide range of ideas and material it shows!

Exercise 1

In the sequence you will hear a reading from Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.279, 'To Romans I set no boundary in space or time. I have granted them dominion and it has no end'.

To help you focus quickly on some of the central questions as you watch, answer the following questions:

How did Rome see its role in the world?

What key questions follow from this?

Introducing the Roman world (video 8 minutes)

Video content is not available in this format.

[Introducing the Roman World](#)

The answer to the first of these questions is that Rome saw its role as an imperial power with a mission to civilise the rest of the world. This was certainly the view held by Romans such as Pliny the Elder (whose comments are paraphrased in the video sequence), and men who thought and wrote about the empire and went out to the provinces as governors and officials. But the empire involved many other, ordinary people of various cultural backgrounds, and this raises two key questions: what impact did the empire have on them, and what did it mean to be 'Roman'? As you will soon discover, we must not make easy assumptions about who is described by this term. The Romans I mention above were all people associated with Rome itself and with the imperial authorities there – a small elite group. But in what sense did those who were not part of this group consider themselves 'Roman'? This question is central to the course.

The period covered by the course is roughly from the middle of the first century BC to the early part of the third century AD, and material from many parts of the Roman Empire will be examined.

2 Defining terms

2.1 'Roman Empire'

First of all there are some fundamental questions to settle about what is involved in the term 'Roman Empire': what is meant by 'Roman', and what by 'empire'?

What 'Roman' signifies is the key question of this course, and the quest to define Roman-ness, or *romanitas*, will recur as a central topic. To begin, let us reflect on the various meanings we attach to the word 'Roman'. We use it in connection with the city, the empire and the people, and each usage involves different identities. So it is important to be aware of its various connotations.

What 'empire' signifies is perhaps more complicated than one might think. Like the word 'Rome', we use 'empire' to mean various things: it can signify space (the territory of an empire), a period (during which an empire held sway), and a system of rule (for instance, one that differs from a republic, which has elected rulers). Certainly the term 'Roman Empire' involves all three meanings, sometimes separately, sometimes all at once. In Latin, too, the word *imperium*, which came to be used for 'empire', contains a similar set of meanings, and we find that ancient sources also used the term in different ways (though probably more often to signify space or control rather than time). So the terminology has always been potentially complicated.

What compounds the complication is that in historical terms 'Rome had an empire before becoming an empire' (Nicolet, 1991, p. 1). Although this may sound like a riddle it is simply explained by the fact that Rome had territory under its control from the third century BC, long before its republican system of government ended and the empire started with Augustus. During the later stage of the republic this territory continued to grow, through conquest or successful diplomacy, and Augustus contributed further to this great expansion when the period of 'empire' began, as he himself later boasted (Wells, p. 77). Look at the different stages indicated on the map (Plate 1) below. This shows the expansion of Rome's control through the third and second centuries BC, at the death of Augustus in AD 14, and at the end of Trajan's reign in AD 117. As you will discover when you read narratives of events, this period of transition between republic and empire was complex, turbulent and fraught with contested change. A central reason for this is that the old republican mechanisms of government were not proving adequate to managing the vastly extended territory, and the situation was open to exploitation by powerful individuals. Various solutions were tried before Augustus eventually took sole control.

Click to view [Plate 1: Map showing the growth of Roman rule](#). (Based on Boardman, J., Griffin, J. and Murray, O. (eds) (1996) *The Roman World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 126–7; by permission of Oxford University Press) (PDF, 1 pages, 1.8MB)

I will now explore some aspects of this so that you can see more clearly what was at stake in terms of 'empire'. A key to this is the Roman concept of *imperium*.

2.2 *Imperium* as power: Augustus and the beginning

of the empire

The basic meaning of the Latin term *imperium* was 'command' and the term included the authority that lay behind the mandate. During the long period in which Rome was a republic, *imperium* signified the power attached to the office of the leading elected magistrates of the city, notably the two annual consuls and the lower-ranking praetors. It was the consuls who commanded the armies and went to the provinces assigned them by the senate. Praetors too came to share a military function as the territory controlled by Rome increased and they were appointed to administer provinces.

But over time additional mechanisms were evolved which extended *imperium* to other individuals in special circumstances. One was the ancient office of *dictator* which gave supreme control to a single senior magistrate in times of particular need; but in the mid and late republic this title was given only twice, once to Sulla in 81 BC and then to Julius Caesar, who was appointed *dictator* several times from 49 BC, and life-long *dictator* before his death in 44 BC. A second procedure which was regularly used was the extension of a magistrate's *imperium* to cover the year following his tenure of office. This created pro-magistrates such as pro-consuls and pro-praetors who were also often involved in managing the provinces. Very occasionally *imperium* could be granted to an individual who was not a magistrate to deal with some exceptional situation.

Imperium, then, was the basis of real authority and military clout. The issues of who wielded this power and how became of urgent importance in the first century BC, since it had become clear by then that the established administrative mechanisms of the republic were inadequate to deal with the problems brought by territorial gains. The careers of Pompey the Great (Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus) and Julius Caesar both reflect a strong tension between the exercise of real power and the constitutional need to contain it within a proper base. Pompey had been granted military commands and triumphs without ever being a magistrate, and when he eventually became consul in 70 BC it was because he had forced the senate to let him skip the earlier stages on the conventional ladder of magistracies. Outside Rome he came to gain extraordinary power and influence in the east, where he had defeated King Mithridates of Pontus and was courted by many local rulers wishing to gain recognition. Perhaps even more significant for the development of the later empire were the activities of Julius Caesar in the period after Pompey's death in 48 BC. Holding consulships and the dictatorship, he embarked on reforms which addressed some major problems to do with the administration of the provinces. Honours were heaped on him, and although he was aware of the need to keep within the bounds of republicanism, his behaviour as a virtual monarch led to his assassination in 44 BC. He is often described as being, in effect, the first Roman emperor. It is clear that after him there was no possible going back to the broader power base that the republic (theoretically at least) entailed. This momentum lay behind the developments which culminated in the battle of Actium in 31 BC. After that Augustus (or Octavian, to use the name modern scholars give him at this stage in his career [Goodman, p. 33]) came to take full military control of Rome and its territories. But it was in his skilful manipulation of the existing constitutional structures of the republic that 'empire' was set up for the first time.

As well as military control, Augustus needed a legitimate base from which to exercise *imperium*. This could not be the office of *dictator* given the resentment it provoked in the case of his great-uncle Julius Caesar. Instead he looked for an arrangement that would be constitutionally valid, and at the same time give him a special place from which he could work with other groups in Rome whose continued support was obviously necessary for the control of the vast territory. The result was a settlement in 27 BC whereby the senate

invested Augustus with a consul's *imperium* from which to govern his huge *provinda* (province). (Like *imperium*, the Latin word *provinda* has a dual meaning in terms of 'place' and 'sphere of command'.) Augustus was now technically a magistrate in the time-honoured republican tradition, and later added the powers of other offices to this, gradually assuming their *imperium* for the single person of the ruler. Thus he could claim that he was operating within Rome's established framework of magistracies, but with a significant difference: in recording his achievements in *Res Gestae* 34 he describes that 'I surpassed everyone in influence but I had no more power than others who were my colleagues in the different magistracies'. (*Res Gestae* is a vast inscription in which Augustus recorded his achievements as a type of autobiographical epitaph.) This sums up his vision: his power (*potestas*) was constitutionally no more than that of his colleagues in office, but it was his influence (*auctoritas*), derived from this combination of magistracies, that gave him supremacy. Writing a century or so later, the historian Tacitus related: 'Augustus, using the title *princeps*, took the whole state worn out with the troubles of civil war into his *imperium*' (*Annals* 1.1).

It was at this time, then, that *imperium* was transformed from the broad-based practices of the republic to the ultimate authority of a single ruler. Augustus favoured the title *princeps* because of its republican connotations (meaning 'first man' or 'a prominent statesman') rather than *dictator* or the authoritarian *dominus*, so his rule is often described as 'the principate'. But from now on the term *imperium Romanum* was also increasingly used in ancient sources. It was the start of the Roman Empire.

2.3 Acquiring territory

As you saw from the map (Plate 1), Rome had been gaining control over territories in the Mediterranean from the third century BC: following its expansion in Italy came conquest of Sicily, Spain and north Africa (after the second Punic war), parts of Asia Minor, Macedonia and Greece. Then, in the first century BC under Pompey, territories in the east were annexed, and in the west under Julius Caesar, Gaul was pacified and an abortive invasion of Britain made. The administration and control of these areas threw up some major problems. A regular practice was to designate the area as a province and place its government in the hands of senior magistrates sent out from Rome on a one-year appointment. This could have particularly unsettling effects on the management of the territory, as did the fact that local taxation was usually placed in the hands of Roman collectors who worked on a profit-making basis. Other practices had a more stabilising effect on the relationship between Rome and the territory. These included the planting of settlements, giving benefits of citizenship to local leaders to encourage their co-operation (as Julius Caesar did in Gaul), and treaties with neighbouring communities.

Such territorial gains raise the key question of how far Rome had a deliberate policy of expansion. This is hotly debated among modern historians. On one hand it is argued (as many Romans might have done) that in the third and second centuries BC these gains resulted from defensive campaigns which Romans had had to undertake for themselves or for their allies. On the other hand there is evidence to suggest that desire for wealth and power – for individuals as well as for the state – motivated a conscious policy of territorial expansion. Certainly some sectors of Roman society did very well out of it: senators and tax collectors could become very wealthy, while the traditional one-year *imperium* for magistrates encouraged individuals to strive for glory while they could. Consequently, money, loot and slaves all flowed to Rome.

As for a 'concept of empire', that is to say of the 'empire' as a spatial and political entity, this too is hard to tease out from the rhetoric. As Whittaker (1994, pp. 10–30) points out, the ambivalent terminology which blurs distinctions between the geographical 'empire' and the 'empire' of applied power seems to have to set up a dualistic view: Romans could speak of their rule as somewhat distinct from the place in which it was applied, yet use the word *imperium* in each case.

So in the late republic Cicero could say that 'the world is already contained within our *imperium*' (*On the Republic* 3.15.24), or the Augustan poet Virgil speak of Rome's *imperium* without an end (*Aeneid* 1.279). Phrases such as these intermingle the different concepts of empire as time and space and as a source of power.

During the republic there was no sign of any deliberate policy of extending Roman frontiers. But for the empire it has been argued that there was a 'grand strategy' of expansion which operated at least until the reign of Trajan at the start of the second century AD (Whittaker, 1994, pp. 62–70). And the rhetoric of 'empire without an end' meant that both Roman withdrawals and invasion of new territory might be judged against that ideal.

Yet there is evidence to suggest that there was often a much more pragmatic approach. According to Tacitus, Augustus advised his successor Tiberius that 'the empire should be kept within its boundaries' (*Annals* 1.11); but the case of Britain shows how motivation to acquire new territory continued along with problems about the location and style of the empire's northern frontier.

2.4 'Culture, identity and power'

Having unpacked some of the issues to do with the term 'Roman Empire' we turn now to 'culture, identity and power', wide-ranging terms involving many different aspects which are often closely interlocked.

The following essay, 'Looking for culture, identity and power', is designed to help you consider various factors and experiences that helped to shape culture, identity and power as social forces in the empire. It introduces some key topics and terminology. Please read it now before doing the exercise below.

Click to view [Looking for culture, identity and power \(PDF\)](#)

Exercise 2

Look at Plate 2 below, the image on the tombstone of a Roman soldier, Sextus Valerius Genialis, found at Cirencester in Gloucestershire and dated to the middle of the first century AD. Look at the figures of the soldier and the defeated barbarian in the main scene and relate them to what you have read in the essay. (To do this, you may find it helpful to consider the dress of the figures on the mosaic: Figures 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3 in the essay.) What do the soldier and the barbarian wear, and what does this suggest about their respective cultural identities? Look at how each is positioned. What does this suggest about their relationship in terms of power?

Click to view [Plate 2: Tombstone of the soldier Sextus Valerius Genialis](#). Omnium Museum, Cirencester. Mid first century AD (PDF, 1 pages, 1.7MB)

As the essay made clear, culture, identity and power interacted in many different ways across the Roman Empire, and to get the best overall picture we need to work with a variety of material, often scrutinising details such as these. So the rather basic questions in this exercise provide a good lead into wider matters.

Dress, as the essay showed, is often used to signify identity within a culture. Here a major distinction is being made: Genialis is dressed in an elaborate helmet and body-armour; the barbarian is naked. Genialis is fully armed with a sword, shield and lance which he aims downwards at his enemy; he appears to be carrying some sort of standard in his left hand. The significance of this seems to be that Genialis is being depicted as a 'Roman', while the barbarian is represented as scarcely human (even his facial features are crude and boorish). This contrast is reinforced by their relative positions: the cavalryman rises self-confidently over the barbarian who seems to be lying huddled against his shield, about to be trampled as well as speared.

Obviously this scene is celebrating Roman power and an apparently effortless triumph of Roman culture over 'barbarity', but the identities of the figures, and their relationship, are expressed in such polarised terms that the image is more to do with constructing an idea than with recording an actual incident. Although various details look 'naturalistic' – the particular type of armour for instance – the theme of triumphant horseman and conquered enemy is formulaic, and used here as part of the rhetoric about Rome's power.

So even a single image may represent major ideas about culture, identity and power, and may do so with effective simplicity.

Conclusion

This free course provided an introduction to studying the arts and humanities. It took you through a series of exercises designed to develop your approach to study and learning at a distance and helped to improve your confidence as an independent learner.

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Acknowledgements

This course was written by Dr Janet Huskinson

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'Culture Identity and Power in the Roman Empire – Introduction to the Course', Janet Huskinson, OU, 1999

'Experiencing Rome – Culture, Identity and Power in the Roman Empire', Janet Huskinson, OU/Routledge, 2000

Figure 1.1 Mosaic showing Rome and provinces from a house in El Djem, Tunisia. Museum of El Djem, Tunis. (Photo: Gilles Mermet)

Figure 1.2 Detail showing the central figure of Rome, Museum of El Djem, Tunis. (Photo: Gilles Mermet)

Figure 1.3 Detail showing Africa, Museum of El Djem, Tunis. (Photo: Gilles Mermet)

Figure 1.4 Statue of Hadrian from Cyrene, c AD 122. The British Museum. © Trustees of The British Museum

Figure 1.5 Relief of Cyrene crowned by Libya, second century AD, The British Museum. © Trustees of The British Museum

Figure 1.6 © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, inv. No 88.643, Benjamin Cheney Fund

Figure 1.7 The Gemma Augusta, cameo, first century AD. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Plate 1 From Boardman, J. Griffin J and Murray O. (eds) (1996), 'The Roman World', Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 126–7, by permission of Oxford University Press

Plate 2 Tombstone of soldier Sextus Valerius genialis, Corinium Museum, Cirencester. © Cotswold District Council, Corinium Museum, used with permission

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