

Roman Imperialism and the Murder-Suicide of Classical Civilization

It is not widely well-understood why the Roman empire fell. Why did the western half of the empire succumb to the barbarian hordes it had conquered or kept at bay for centuries? Why was the eastern half of the empire able to survive for another thousand years, albeit a thousand years of stagnation? Far too simplistic an answer would be that the cause was poor leadership, greed, or weakness brought on by centuries of relative peace and luxury. Some have recognized the very large role played by disastrous economic policies in the decline and fall of Rome, particularly beginning in the early empire.¹ Essentially, Roman society (and its economy) died by self-strangulation at the hands of its state. At the risk of disappointing those who know me, however, my main focus will not be on the economic causes of the decline and fall of Rome, and with it, the decline and fall of classical civilization. Rather, my aim in this paper will be to analyze that which established the precedent(s) and set the stage for the economic and other factors in the decline and fall of Rome: namely, Roman imperialism. In particular, I will focus on the roles played by Roman “virtue” and by the pro-magistracies of the Roman political system. Ironically, Caesar's account of his exploits in the Gallic War provides some good illustrations.

Before discussing how Roman imperialism led to the decline and fall of Rome, it is necessary to at least sketch roughly the importance of the politico-economic factors. Before the rise of Rome, the ancient Mediterranean enjoyed what amounted to a de facto free market, relatively speaking, due in large part to the political decentralization of the region. Political turbulence and competition led to the

¹ See, in particular, Nicholas Davidson, “The Ancient Suicide of the West,” *The Freeman: Ideas on Liberty*, Vol. 37, No. 12 (December 1987), <<http://www.fee.org/vnews.php?nid=1841>>; Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, Scholar's Edition (Auburn: The Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1998 [1949]), <<http://www.mises.org/humanaction/pdf/HumanActionScholars.pdf>>, pp. 761-763.

expansion of trade, despite obstacles such as piracy and the like, which in turn led to increasing prosperity and the rise of a large and affluent middle class. Rome, however, swallowed up classical civilization little by little until, at the height of its power, it encompassed much of the known world. Beginning with the early empire, the decline of Rome and classical civilization began in earnest. Deleterious practices begun in the late republic were continued, extended, and systematized in the empire; and new ones were invented. Senators were prohibited from engaging in trade by a law of 218 BC that forbade them to own cargo ships, thus leaving them with investment in land and plundering wartime enemies as their primary sources of wealth. “Barred from commerce by law and custom, the upper class sought to maintain its prerogatives by limiting the commercial opportunities open to others. The Macedonian mines were closed, and those of Italy virtually so, with this intention.”² The persistent problem of *agri deserta* – fertile but deserted farmland – resulted from onerous taxation and state agricultural and financial policies implemented, among other things, in order to provide free food and wine for the people. As the empire matured, the Roman state increasingly regulated and absorbed the functions and aspects of society and market, to the point that in the late empire Rome more resembled medieval civilization than classical civilization. Peasants, workers, and even landowners were tied by law to their land. In the state-controlled system of *collegia* (or guilds), members could not change occupations and sons were required to take up their fathers' profession. Production and trade became increasingly stifled. Diocletian, in particular, radically expanded the imperial bureaucracy. Workers (not slaves) in state munitions manufactories and in the government mints were regimented, ranked like soldiers, and branded so that they could not escape. Such policies and more are largely responsible for the enfeeblement and fall of Roman and classical civilization.³

What made such policies possible, however? The answer lies in the shift from republic to

2 Davidson, p. 3

3 For a more detailed chronological analysis, see Davidson (1987).

empire and why this occurred. In both the Roman republic and empire, civil rights and duties were defined not in terms of individuals but as properties of collective bodies. Liberty and freedom were political concepts referring to a collective or corporate body.⁴ In principle the power of the State over individual citizens was absolute, but in practice it was limited so long as there remained a *relative* balance in power among these collective bodies (i.e., a senatorial governing class, an aristocracy of equites, the various tribes and extended families, the plebs, etc.). The expanding use of pro-magistracies in the late republic increasingly upset this balance, however. The pro-magistracies were not official magistracies of the Roman people at all, but those granted a pro-magistracy (such as pro-consul) acquired the power of *imperium* nonetheless. Moreover, the magistracies were limited in number (“twenty quaestors, eight praetors, and two consuls by Sulla's time”⁵), but the pro-magistracies were limited neither in number nor by annual popular elections.

These pro-magistracies were the men who, through the second and first centuries BC, extended the power and influence of the Roman state throughout the Mediterranean world and beyond. It was as pro-magistrates, even more than as magistrates, that the political elite commanded the armies which defeated the kings of Macedon and the tribes of Spain in the second century and controlled the *prouvinciae* [invaded or conquered provinces] which were allotted to them for the exercise of their *imperium*.⁶

The pro-magistracies were created by an act called prorogation by the Senate in which the *imperium* of a magistrate would be extended beyond the normal limit so that he could finish conducting some important business, such as a war. In exceptional cases, *imperium* was also given to individuals who were not already holding a magistracy about to expire. By 107 B.C., however, the power of the Senate and of the noble families were undermined by the first successful attempt to create a pro-magistracy through the people's assemblies.⁷ Thus, Roman politician-generals could retain their power and

4 For examples of this in Caesar, *The Gallic War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), see pages 12, 18, 143, and 178.

5 Peter Jones and Keith Sidwell, eds., *The World of Rome: An Introduction to Roman Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), sec. 145, p. 103.

6 *Ibid.*, sec. 151, p. 107.

7 *Ibid.*, sec. 152, p. 107.

command of their armies long after their year in office was up.

The power of consuls and pro-consuls over their assigned *prouincia* was nearly unchecked, save that their *prouincia* were assigned by the Senate and their service was subject to review for flagrant abuses only at the end of their term in office.⁸ I find it likely that abuses would often be overlooked in light of great victories, however. Moreover, while in office they were immune to prosecution for any crimes they committed. This great power gave the generals and governors of Rome the ability to act with alacrity and unified purpose in their *prouincia*, but it also allowed them to entangle Rome in the affairs of other countries, numerous wars of conquest, and not a few adventures in manufacturing allies who would later prove disloyal.⁹ Rome's imperial wars not only served to enrich Rome, expand her power, and promote her glory in the eyes of her people; they also served to increase the wealth, glory, fame, and *power and influence* of the politician-generals who conducted them. The invention of the pro-consulship, and particularly the assignment of pro-consulship by the people's assemblies, served to magnify this phenomenon. The pro-consulships gave men like Caesar more time to foster personal loyalty in their armies, to acquire resources, to avoid prosecution for crimes committed, and to build their reputation and influence. Moreover, pro-consulships allowed these men more opportunities to influence legislation to their benefit, since only magistrates like the consuls, pro-consuls, and tribunes could propose legislation; the people themselves could only vote for or against these proposals. The opportunity to have one's power extended in duration to finish important tasks no doubt provided an extra incentive to instigate wars as well.

The Roman political system, then, was organized to facilitate a militaristic and imperialistic foreign policy. This had a reciprocal effect on, and its source in, Roman virtue and culture. Roman virtue was not Greek virtue, particularly not Platonic or Aristotelian virtue. The Latin words for virtue

⁸ Caesar himself alludes to this at the top of p. 23; see also *The World of Rome*, sections 178-184, pp. 126-131.

⁹ A number of cases involving betrayal by former allies placed or helped into power by Rome are illustrated in Caesar's

(virtus as well as the plural of animus: animi) carried a strong connotation of (martial) courage and manliness.¹⁰ Courage seems to have a primarily martial connotation for the Romans. Virtue for the Romans was primarily martial virtue, and the related or derivative personal, political, and religious virtues. The need to appear prudent, courageous, valorous, and successful in military endeavors is pervasive throughout Caesar's history of the Gallic War. It was primarily great victories in war, and to a lesser extent political achievements, that earned one the highest praise and honors. Caesar repeatedly paints luxury and peace as the causes of weakness and cowardice.¹¹

The unity of virtue principle and the notion of courage as a mean between extremes, the vices of recklessness and cowardice, seem to be absent in Caesar's writing. On page 172 we see Caesar chastise his soldiers for imprudence and overeagerness, while he nevertheless praises their courage. On pages 11 and 172 Caesar illustrates the need to restrain the imprudence and overeagerness of his troops, to control the exercise of their courage. On page 75 we see one courageous brother sacrifice himself for the other, but then the other promptly wastes the sacrifice by rushing back to avenge the first brother's death and getting killed himself. On pages 24, 33, and 189 we see the overriding importance of the social recognition of virtue for Caesar, and probably for other Romans as well. Caesar attributes the concern for reputation and presence of witnesses as the primary motivator of virtue.

Caesar's own history of the Gallic War seems calculated to enhance and spread his reputation for valor and martial success. In a number of instances he appears to exaggerate his own exploits and the strength and numbers of his enemies,¹² to take actions designed to enhance his own personal position (such as his invasion of Britain), and to carefully spin his mistakes to present them in the best

history of the Gallic War; see, for example, pages 22, 28, 80, 161, 164, 186, and 187.

¹⁰ Frederic M. Wheelock, *Wheelock's Latin*, 6th Revised Edition, revised by Richard A. LaFleur (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005).

¹¹ See pages 23, 71, and 131.

¹² I don't know if Caesar's numbers are accurate or not, but they strike me as inflated.

light possible (such as his defeat by Vercingetorix in Gergovia¹³). Ironically, although Caesar has one of his opponents, Ariovistus, invoke the right of conquest and accuse the Romans of recognizing it as well, the history of Rome supports Ariovistus's accusation.¹⁴ Rome and Caesar were justified in conquering the known world because of their greatness and virtue. On page 84 Caesar has defeated enemies committing themselves and their states not to Rome, or Rome *and* Caesar, but to Caesar alone.

Finally, from a modern perspective, it is well to note the disregard that Caesar, and one suspects Romans in general, had for the value of individual human lives and for property (or, at least, non-Roman lives and property). On page 52 we see the looting and selling into slavery of an entire town. On page 159 we are treated to the wholesale slaughter of noncombatants: women, children, and the elderly.¹⁵

Roman virtue and culture, then, were decidedly martial in focus. Roman virtue and Rome's political system, particularly the pro-magistracies, reciprocally reinforced each other and fostered Rome's foreign policy of imperialism. These were some of the major factors, though arguably not the only ones, that led to the eventual and inevitable decline and fall of Rome; and, with it, of classical civilization. Ironically, the very source of Rome's greatness was also to be the source of its destruction. Roman imperialism, and that which made it possible and so successful, led to the attempted perpetual dictatorship of Caesar and the end of the republic. With the end of the republic, the power of Rome's magistracies were divorced from them and consolidated into the hands of one pro-magistrate, Caesar's adopted son Augustus. This centralization of power, along the consolidation of the Mediterranean world under the power of Rome, would eventually and inevitably lead to the self-strangulation of Roman and classical civilization at the hands of the Roman state.

¹³ See pages 168-172.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁵ Not that the German and Gallic "barbarians" were any better in this regard.