Indexing Roman imperialism

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This paper is a brief account of a research project on the changing attitudes of the Roman upper classes to the emergence of the Roman Empire from the late third century BC to the early second century AD. The methodology consists of the examination of certain key words, their meaning and context, throughout the period, and the paper describes the way in which these data are collected and analysed.

The sheer size and longevity of the Roman Empire have long fascinated historians, and made the study of its origins and development a matter of continuing interest. In the final two decades of the third century BC the city of Rome, already the hegemonic leader of a network of alliances which encompassed the whole of Italy south of the Po valley, expelled from Italy the Carthaginian commander, Hannibal, and following his defeat in his home territory of north Africa in 202 BC, emerged as the most powerful state in the Mediterranean basin.

The expansion of Roman power in those 20 years, and into both the eastern and western Mediterranean in the period that followed, led the Greek historian Polybius in the later second century to ask in the preamble to his history of the time, who there was who was so worthless or lazy as not to want to discover how and under what type of government almost the whole of the inhabited world was overmastered in less than 53 years by one power, the Romans, something which had never been seen before (Polybius 1.1.5).

By the end of the first century BC the Roman republic, torn apart by civil wars between its military commanders, had been transformed into a monarchy under the first emperor, Augustus, whose control extended from the Iberian peninsula in the west to Syria in the east, and from the English Channel to the Sahara, with a European frontier which ran the length of the Rhine and the Danube. This was the empire which was to continue, in varying forms but essentially the same extent, for the next four centuries.

Historical explanations

For most of the 20th century the predominant explanation of this remarkable phenomenon was that of the great German historian, Theodor Mommsen, who in his Römische Geschichte, which appeared in several editions from the late 19th century onwards, outlined an account of what came to be known as ‘defensive imperialism’: that the Romans through the Republican period expanded their control in response to perceived threats from other powers, rather than as a concerted policy of gaining territory for themselves (Mommsen, 1912–19: 1.699).

The reason for this account lay in an attempt to explain the apparent reluctance of the Roman senate to establish a permanent military presence following successful wars, especially in Greece and the eastern Mediterranean through the second century BC. Mommsen believed that the establishment of a territorial empire came about only as a result of the failure of the Romans to guarantee what they saw as their own security by other means.

In 1979 William Harris, of Columbia University, published a seminal book (Harris, 1979) in which he argued that Rome was in fact a fundamentally aggressive and militaristic state, always keen to expand its empire, and that it annexed territory as a matter of course, unless special reasons persuaded the senate to depart from their normal policy on a particular occasion. This has now become the new orthodoxy.

My early research

My own interest in this debate came from work that I undertook from the late 1960s onwards on the Roman experience in the Iberian peninsula (Richardson, 1986, 1996). Neither Mommsen nor Harris seemed to me to provide a satisfactory account of the growth and change of Roman imperial power. While Harris’s picture of Rome as a state designed to undertake warfare, and always prepared to do so, was more consistent with the evidence for the period than Mommsen’s (or at least that of Mommsen’s followers), his belief that the basic policy of the senate was one of annexation of territory did not seem to account for the slow development of the structures of empire, such as taxation and administration, which emerged only gradually and as the result of a series of ad hoc decisions taken by individual commanders on the ground.

In particular, I could find no evidence that the senate, as the central governing body of the republic, ever took a decision to annex territory, although they regularly decided to prosecute wars in areas round the Mediterranean. At one level this may seem to be a purely semantic distinction, but it is just such variations in linguistic style that might be expected to mark differences of understanding among those who use them as to the nature of what they were doing as the empire grew.

The language the Romans used

A preliminary examination of the language the Romans employed to talk about the mechanisms of imperial expansion from the late third and second centuries BC down to the second century AD showed that the vocabulary was based on the structures of the city-state and its magistrates
(Richardson, 1991). In particular the word *imperium*, whence our words ‘empire’ and ‘imperial’, means in the mid-republic ‘power’, either that given to an annually elected magistrate (particularly the two consuls, who had supreme command of the armies as well as being the foremost civil executives, and the praetors, who also undertook military and legal responsibilities) or to promagistrates, who were empowered to act as magistrates, usually after serving in magisterial office.

*Imperium* is also used of the power of the Roman people as a whole, so that the phrase ‘the power of the Roman people’ (*imperium populi Romani*) often represents the activity or even the entity of the Roman state. Similarly the word *provincia*, whence our word ‘province’, is used at the beginning of our period almost exclusively for the task assigned to a magistrate or promagistrate who holds *imperium*: this might be a military command (often defined geographically, such as ‘the province of Macedonia’ or ‘the province of Nearer Spain’) or some other function (such as the ‘urban province’, which comprised the jurisdiction of the praetor in civil cases in the city of Rome).

While this range of meanings for *imperium* and *provincia* continue through the period I examined, it became clear that other senses accrued to these two words, and that in particular *imperium* came to be used to refer to the physical, territorial entity that we would call the Roman Empire, that is, a land mass with extension and boundaries. This widening of the semantic range of the word seemed to me to reflect a shift in the Roman attitude to their imperial activity, which both Mommsen and Harris had not adequately taken account of in their explanations of Roman imperialism: a change from seeing their aim as exercising power over others in order to get them to do what the Romans wanted, to the acquisition, control and governance of territories around the Mediterranean as an end in itself. My more detailed research has since then consisted in attempting to determine whether the shifts in attitude that I believed I was noticing were actually capable of being documented in an examination of the meanings of these words and the contexts of their use throughout the period.

**Spoken and written language**

At this point I was faced with the problem that confronts anyone who works on the history of the ancient classical world. Although the Greeks and Romans have left a substantial amount of literature, virtually none of it can be reckoned as representative of the spoken language of the people of antiquity. The poems, plays, speeches, histories and philosophical and technical writings of the ancients are decidedly literary, and were written by and for the educated upper classes; and in a different way, the surviving inscriptions from the period, mostly commemorative or official, are also distinctly limited in linguistic scope.

For an investigation such as I wished to undertake, however, this was less of a problem than for other pieces of linguistic analysis, because the people whose attitudes I was trying to determine were precisely the educated upper classes who shaped the policies of the city of Rome. I needed to analyse and track the notions that underlay the patterns of meaning of these people in their usage of such words as *imperium* and *provincia*. It is true that, even in terms of the literary output of the Latin-speaking (and to a lesser extent the Greek-speaking) upper classes of the period, we have only a tiny amount of what we know to have been produced, and that that tiny amount was actually written by a few individuals; but an analysis sensitive to these inevitable limitations should none the less be able to show changes in underlying notions across a period of three or four centuries.

**The research**

To carry out this analysis I had to examine every available use of the words with which I was concerned in surviving texts across the period. Even half a century ago, such a task would have meant a lifetime’s project for a sizeable team of scholars; but the development of electronic texts and of computer-based databases and spreadsheets has made such a project feasible to an individual over a relatively short time span.

Classical texts, which have been the object of intense scholarly work over the past five centuries and which comprise a corpus that by its very nature is closed (no new works will ever be added, and relatively few new additions discovered), have generated much interest from an early stage in those interested in working on the analysis of corpora of literary writings by electronic methods. For Greek texts, I use the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, produced by the University of California, a project begun in 1972 and which now includes virtually the whole of Greek literature from the Homeric epics of the eighth century BC down to the beginning of the seventh century AD; and for Latin texts, the collection produced by the Packard Humanities Institute, which contains all the main Latin texts of the period with which I am concerned.

On two compact disks, therefore, I have all the ancient literary texts I need for my analysis. I use a reader program called *Musaios*, written and developed by Darl J. Dumont and Randall M. Smith in Los Angeles, which allows both simple and Boolean searches of both disks. These enable me to locate all the passages using the words in which I am interested, and to transfer them to a Word file. I then cut and paste the passage onto a database (for which I use *Idealist*, produced in the early 1990s by Blackwell Scientific, and which has served me well for many projects over the past 15 years). The database also contains the author, name of work and reference for each passage, as well as a preliminary comment on the content and the meaning and context of the key word. I then transfer the data I have accumulated onto to Excel spreadsheets, to aid analysis of the patterns of usage.

In effect, what I have been doing is to produce a specialized lexicon, with comments on the usage and context of every occasion on which the word concerned is used. My database now covers 2665 passages in which the word *imperium* was used, from the comic playwright Plautus at the end of the third century BC down to the satirist Juvenal, writing c. AD 125; and 2115 passages using the word *provincia*, across the same period. My hope is that this will
allow an ‘indexing’ of the change in attitude that I had previously identified in outline, from an imperialism centred on the control of other states and peoples to one based on a territorial empire.

Early results

So far the results have been promising: it is notable that the phrase that is most commonly thought of as naming the Roman Empire, *imperium Romanum*, does not occur at all in surviving Latin until the very end of the republican period, in the 40s BC, and the earliest examples of *imperium* in a territorial sense seem to belong to the latter half of the reign of the first emperor, Augustus, in the first years of the Christian era. Similarly *provincia*, while retaining its primary meaning of a responsibility of a magistrate or promagistrate, also acquires the sense of a territory organized by the Romans and under their exclusive control in the reign of the second emperor, Tiberius, in the early 30s AD.

These data, alongside an investigation of the administrative and organizational structures of the emerging empire, form the basis of the book I am currently in the process of writing. Because they include all the occasions on which these words are used, not just those on which the authors concerned are developing or expounding their own views on imperialism or the empire, they provide access to the background patterns of thought of those who directly or indirectly were engaged with the processes that led to establishment of the largest and most long-lived political entity of antiquity, and help to answer the question that lies at the root of my current research: what did the Romans think they were doing while they were constructing the Roman Empire?

The answer, not surprisingly, turns out to be more complex and more differentiated than the question, but that is the nature of history. And that result, at least, would not have surprised Polybius, who asked his question at the beginning of his history in the mid-second century BC. His answer took a further 40 books to write. I shall be briefer.

Bibliography


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