

Extension, Decline, and Importance:
Roman Imperialism as a World-Historical Phenomenon

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Prompt #1

At its height in the first century CE, the Roman Empire struggled to maintain a balance between its growing amount of territories and the resulting instability that it produced for the government and economy. Rome's borders stretched from Asia Minor to Western Europe, encapsulating a large range of peoples and resources that were able to be manipulated and controlled under the empire's control. Roman imperialism was made possible by a highly militarized central power which contributed to the successfulness of its conquering of surrounding lands; however, this same amount of land contributed to the downfall of the empire. In the end, a lack of available resources to control its large territory and a constantly decreasing presence of a centralized government stopped the spread of Roman imperialism and dominance, and resulted in a split of the land into the Western Roman and Eastern Byzantine Empires. Much like that of the Mongol Empire, Roman imperialism demonstrates the challenges and ultimate failings that many pre-modern societies faced in terms of growth and control. Initially succeeding at first in expanding its territory to encompass large amounts of land, both ultimately disintegrated for similar reasons surrounding a lack of centralized power and control brought about by social pressures and a lack of clear governmental control. While the Romans sought domination through the isolation of non-citizens and territorial control, the Mongols were able to achieve a more successful system of imperialism via cultural assimilation with conquered peoples. Ultimately, Roman imperialism's extent and limitations viewed in a world historical context reveal deeper preoccupations with empirical dominance and control through non-sustainable techniques of separation and conformity, contributing to its eventual downfall and fall from power in the Western world.

Contributing to its rise to power in the first millennium BCE, Rome's centralized government and resulting military organization created a favorable setting for imperial conquest.

Desiring the resources and prime trading locations of surrounding areas throughout the Mediterranean such as Alexandria, Romans began to focus their attention on military and political strategies to extend their empire¹. Under the power of Roman officials and emperors such as Caesar and Augustus, the government was able to go forth in conquest of its surrounding lands, as well as “organized their society for war and made victory their supreme value.”² In order to be able to create a strong military presence however, another factor needed to be available to the government, and this was Roman alliances. Roman allies did not pay a tribute in the pre-modern world, but instead were required to provide manpower to strengthen Rome’s military state as payment³. Aiding in its efforts to gain more resources and land, this supply of men made it possible for the intense military conquest and control that extended the reach of the Roman Empire. Taking advantage of the weaknesses of surrounding areas and using their governmental and military organization to their advantage, the Romans were able to conquer a large amount of lands and peoples over the course of three hundred years of domination⁴. These relationships between centralization of Roman government and increased military authority facilitated the extension of Roman imperialism across cultural and societal borders throughout the Mediterranean. Ultimately however, through years of over-extension and a gradual decrease in political centralization of power, Roman imperialism began its decline to become a phenomenon of the past.

Roman imperialism’s decline was a result of limiting central government factors and their effects. Due to the large size of the Roman Empire, areas of centralization began to change as a result of social pressures from migrant peoples and intruders. Facing steady incursions from

¹ Andrew Erskine, *Roman Imperialism* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 12.

² Felipe Fernández-Armesto, *The World: A History* (Prentice Hall, 2010), 204.

³ Erskine, *Roman Imperialism*, 15

⁴ B.D. Hoyos, *A Companion to Roman Imperialism* (Boston: Brill, 2013), 11.

“barbarian” invaders from the north, the once central Roman location of the empire was shifted eastward towards a more defensible Greek-speaking zone⁵. Unable to defend itself in the face of numerous migrations of northern Germanic invaders, western Rome suffered greatly in terms of maintaining and controlling its less defensible borders and resources. This shift in power divided the empire into two parts, the Western Roman Empire, and the Byzantine Empire of the East. Further complicating the decentralization of imperial power, disastrous civil wars plagued the Roman republic as a result of combatting ideals and visions for the empire⁶. These civil wars not only took away focus from maintaining the vast amount of land under Roman rule, but also resulted in a decrease in population and military availability in the empire. With less recruitment and less attention to organization and control spent on protective measures, Rome was essentially defenseless against political coups and attacks⁷. Competing for political and military control during Rome’s reign as a world power, these long-term feuds throughout Rome and Greece created political insecurity in terms of ruling forces, as well as subsequently “weakened the empire’s ability to withstand any external attacks.”⁸ Unable to maintain control over the land they had conquered, Roman imperialism began its decline with gradual decentralization of power and social pressures of invading neighbors. While there is no one answer to what limited the extent of Roman imperialism, a combination of both internal and external factors played a role in the creation and downfall of this cultural phenomenon.

Very similar to the Roman Empire, Mongol Imperialism served as a very influential and dominant part of Eurasian culture in the pre-modern world. Mongol conquests “reached farther

⁵ Fernández-Armesto, *The World*, 237.

⁶ John Wachter, *The Roman Empire* (Dent and Sons, 1987), 235.

⁷ Justin Ott, *The Decline and Fall of the Western Roman Empire* (Iowa State University, 2009), 26.

⁸ Wachter, *The Roman Empire*, 235.

and lasted longer than those of any previous nomad empire⁹” and stretched their empire throughout China and much of Central Asia in the thirteenth century CE. Much like the Romans, these nomads used a centralized military force as their main technique to attack and conquer surrounding areas. Chinese records show that by 400 BC, “they had become a formidable cavalry”¹⁰ conquering and uniting Chinese states to add to their young empire. Authority also played a large part in the success of Mongol imperialism: Under the leadership of Genghis Khan in the thirteenth century CE, Mongol invasions began to conquer most of Eurasia¹¹. Genghis Khan’s influence, like that of Caesar or other Roman emperors, served as uniting force for the nomadic culture of the Mongols. In these ways, Mongol and Roman imperialism can be compared across history through their use of military and authoritative resources in order to gain control of surrounding lands.

Where Roman and Mongol imperialism differ however, is in their overall methods of territorial control. While the Mongols focused more on assimilation into subjugated cultures, the Romans separated themselves from the people that they conquered through isolation. Unlike their counterpart’s fragmented population, the diverse groups that made up the area of Mongolia developed and became more unified under Genghis Khan’s leadership¹². The Mongols technique of assimilation to conquered cultures, such as in the adoption of Chinese legal principles of Legalism and taxation, demonstrate an adaptability that was not a big focus of Roman imperialism. In contrast, Roman culture imposed its beliefs more so on those that it conquered, such as in Alexandria. In the first century CE at the height of the Roman Empire, Alexandria’s government was formed as an extension of Roman and Hellenistic influences and

⁹ Fernández-Armesto, *The World*, 415.

¹⁰ Dr. Glyn Daniel, *The Mongols* (Thames and Hudson, 1969), 22.

¹¹ Ibid, 40.

¹² Morris Rossabi, *The Mongols: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2012), 14.

control.¹³ Not allowing the city the right to run its own local governmental council, Roman politicians used their authority to separate Alexandrians from the central control of the political empire. Roman authority also isolated its non-citizens through the guise of religious tolerance in an Alexandrian population with a high number of people from the Jewish faith. These individuals were seen as “foreigners and aliens”¹⁴ and were deprived of the ability to be citizens of the empire. At the same time, space was provided for them in Alexandria and they were free to worship their faith without persecution. In this way, Rome continued to separate the Alexandrian people as being different from the more elite Roman citizens of the original empire; further supporting the idea of conformity and traditional Roman values for all those under their control, regardless of former beliefs.

Analyzing these comparisons and contrasts between Mongol and Roman imperialism can be very important in seeing examples of imperialism through a world-historical light. Though they reached their heights at different eras on the historical timeline, both empires exhibited similar tendencies in military control and centralization. In looking at their differences however, one can learn even more about factors that may have played important roles in the societies at those times. For example, Roman imperialism focused on conquering and subjugating a diverse amount of people to its authority through methods of separation and conformity to traditional roles. This could be argued to have occurred because of the relatively instable political landscape of the time of Roman rule. Without the context of these occurrences and comparisons to other similar phenomenon like Mongol imperialism, it can be difficult to figure out and see what preoccupations may have been in the minds of Roman officials. Using

¹³ Encyclopedia Britannica Online, *Ancient Egypt: Administration and Economy Under Rome*, 2013.

¹⁴ Aryeh Kasher, *The Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (JCB Mohr, 1985), 242.

this information, historians may be able to continue to develop their understanding of the pattern and function of imperialism in the pre-modern world, and its important addition to world history.

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