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Late Roman Decadence and Beyond: Explaining Roman History

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In this talk, I will take you on a trip to ancient Rome, and we will look at some problems from current historiography that are pertinent to the notions of causality and explanation in history.

First, I will address two general issues, the special position of Rome within perceptions of world history, and the evidence that one can use to devise historiographic explanations.

Then, we will turn to two major questions: First, the rise of republican Rome from a city to a world empire. How can we explain that a single city became a superpower that could dominate the whole Mediterranean basin and many adjacent territories?

Second, the inner workings of the Empire once it had conquered the world: How can we explain the decision-making process in the center of power?

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Part 1: Why Rome? – The ancients and us

As a historical phenomenon, the Roman Empire is a notable and in some ways exceptional case: Its continuous growth over a considerable time, the large size that it finally acquired and its long duration as a more or less stable entity. Moreover, its heritage is long-lasting and is felt still today; some of these points are: The influence of Roman law on modern legislation, the origin of the Romance languages as offspring of Latin, or the rise of the Christian religion as well the origin of a Jewish diaspora.

And Rome is constantly present on the modern mind. Ancient Rome is a popular point of reference in modern political and cultural discourse.

When here in Germany, a few months ago, a discussion about our system of social security was started, the notion of a “late Roman decadence” played a major role, and it turned out that almost every politician and every journalist felt compelled to contribute something to this debate. Obviously, a large number of the so-called opinion leaders feel that films like *Ben Hur* and *Quo Vadis* are valid sources of information.

Rome as a sort of established brand was also on the minds of the founders of the American republic when they outfitted their young nation with a “capitol” like ancient Rome, and a “senate” like ancient Rome, irrespective of the fact that both these institutions were of a completely different nature in antiquity.

However, it is not the notion of an ancient republic that evokes most associations today, rather, the notion of empire is frequently the starting point for comparisons between the ancients and us, and it is especially the United States for which such comparisons are popular. In a broader sense Rome appears as a model for the modern world in general:

- Rome had a technical infrastructure that appears strikingly modern.
- Rome had elements of mass entertainment and recreation, like amphitheater and public baths.
- The political culture of Rome, a Republic with a Senate, likewise appears familiar to the modern observer.
- There were even some of the evils that plague modern societies: traffic jams and pollution, slums and criminal gangs.

All these elements add up to the popular impression that the Romans were like us. The consequences within the context of historical explanation are evident: If this was true, it would be tremendously helpful for the historian. Based on a fundamental analogy between Roman antiquity and a modern society, insights and experiences from modern societies, which can be studied in all desired detail, could serve to explain obscure features in Roman history. And vice versa: Knowledge on the Roman past could be used to explain and perhaps even forecast events in our own world.

There is only one problem with this notion of the modernity of the Romans: It does not work. The *apparent* modernity of the Romans is based to a large degree on *superficial* analogies without explanatory power. A brief look at the field of mental dispositions shows how the notion of Roman modernity fails: Cruelty and violence, death penalty and gladiatorial games, international law, human rights, political and personal freedom, slavery and patronage. The hiatus between the ancients and us in these matters should be immediately clear. Later on, I will discuss in more detail that the analogy of a modern state fails even more thoroughly with respect to the machinery of the empire and the way it worked. But first, we move to **[Folie 3]**

Part 2: Why explanation? – The problems of the sources

Rome is among the most intensely investigated past cultures and the amount of things that we know about ancient Rome is enormous. Nevertheless, in some debates the non-existence of universally accepted explanations is salient. A look at the types of available evidence may indicate why some areas are particularly prone to produce longstanding controversies.

There are two main types of evidence, material remains and written accounts. Material

evidence can tell us a great number of things, about ancient conditions of life, of trade routes, production processes and so on. But with respect to causal explanations, in particular when it comes to explaining political or social processes, material evidence has limits. Answers to such questions concerning intentions and motivations are more aptly sought in the historical accounts, but these have their limits, too. First, not everything that has happened was captured in written form, and, second, not everything that was written down has survived to the present day. These are trivial problems of any written accounts of the past. Likewise, writing history was a pastime of members of the upper classes, giving rise to a social bias in their writings, but again this is a problem that we encounter in almost any premodern historiography. Some more specific problems related to Roman history are:

Problem 1: The classical model

Ancient historiography of later eras, i.e. Hellenistic Greece and republican and imperial Rome, considered the earlier works of classical Greece a model that was to be emulated as far as possible. Therefore, the material was always squeezed into this canonical form. And historiography had a number of different intentions – to educate, entertain or surprise the reader, or to make a political point – rather than to capture the course of history in an objective or scientific way. The problem that the ancient sources deliberately blur the picture, that an elegant reading and adherence to the canonical pattern is more important than accurate details, can affect any context that is “technical” in the broadest sense: Technology proper, military matters, economic, administrative or legal affairs.

Problem 2: Rome as the center of the universe

For Roman historians, the city of Rome was the center of the universe, and Roman history was the history of that city. The empire-wide effects of Roman rule and decisions were not relevant. Therefore, issues which are important for modern historiography, such as social and economic history of the empire, have to be reconstructed in a tiresome way from scattered pieces of evidence. And all those accounts that are not Roman in perspective have been written by Greeks instead, thus other peoples under Roman rule remain essentially silent for us.

Problem 3: The not so impartial observer

Many Roman historians of the imperial time were senators, which means that they, in addition to the mentioned general upper-class bias, also had a marked anti-emperor bias, because the

relations between emperor and the senate were frequently strained. This caused senatorial historians to use their writings for revenge, usually after the emperor in question was dead.

Problem 4: Politics in secret

While politics in the republic had been at least partially a public affair, discussed in the senate, the forum and the people's assembly, under the emperors it had become something that was essentially secret, with decisions being made in the inner circle of power. Therefore, the ability of historians in the imperial era to expound the background of political decisions was limited – and this limitation has, of course, been inherited by their modern successors. And those examples of ancient historians who actually had been part of these inner circles are not necessarily reliable, because of their involvement in court intrigue and the urge to use their knowledge for retaliation, as described.

For the earliest phases of Rome we face an additional difficulty: The absence of contemporary writers, so that all material on the times of the kings, the origin of the republic and the beginnings of its rise to the dominant power in Italy is of a later date. So its time to look at the rise of Rome as a superpower.

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Part 3: The rise of Rome

The question how a single city came to dominate the whole Mediterranean world puzzled observers already in ancient times. It was the Greek Polybios, writing in the 2nd century BC, who was the first to tackle it systematically.

A crucial causal factor according to Polybios was the constitution of Rome, which he saw as a perfect balance of different types of constitution. In addition, he considers the Roman army a decisive factor, and this reasoning is popular even today: The conclusion that the Romans dominated the world because they had the best army in the world. You will not encounter this explanation in academic circles today, but in the mass media, in accounts for a general audience it is still alive.

The debate of professional historians on Roman expansion is centered around the notion of imperialism, which has an obvious origin in modern political science. In 1979 William Harris published his “War and Imperialism in Republican Rome, 327-70 B.C.”, which became one of the most influential books on Roman expansion. In the beginning of chapter one he states:

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“Since the Romans acquired their empire largely by fighting, we should investigate their attitudes towards war.”

And this in fact is, in a nutshell, Harris’ program: He investigates the Roman mentality and in his conclusion, it is the extraordinarily warlike character of the Romans that compelled them to uninterrupted warfare, year after year, for centuries, until finally they had conquered anything that was worth to be conquered.

Harris’ theory of a specific Roman urge to go to war has two facets. One is the immediate material benefits of conquest, the increase of territory, the influx of loot and money, from plundering cities, selling their population as slaves, and so on. Concerning this aspect of the theory, Erich Gruen has demonstrated that the crucial decisions of the senate, when and where to go to war, cannot be shown to be generally dominated by economic motives.

But mere greed, the drive for material rewards, would at least have had some sort of rational core. According to Harris, there is an even darker and irrational side to the Roman attitude. According to Harris, the Romans overrated warrior ethos and military glory to such a degree that their attitude became outright pathological. And it is in this form, the notion of a pathological Roman lust for war, that Harris’ view has become popular.

Tim Cornell recapitulates this standard view of Roman belligerence in his study of Rome’s early history. However, he introduces a new turn to the story, because he then identifies the Roman habit of integrating defeated enemies into their political system as the major cause of the rise of republican Rome.

Now here we have something completely different: The explanation put forward by Harris and his followers is an essentialist one: It was the Roman’s nature to be so belligerent. Cornell offers a causal mechanism instead: By turning defeated enemies into allies and, in the long run, allies into citizens of their own state, the Romans created a system that was able to expand continually, because each successful integration of a former enemy into this system increased its military resources. One might describe this a positive feedback loop, and compare it to biological modes of growth.

Independent of Cornell, Arthur Eckstein has identified the same cause for the sustained expansion of Rome, but he also contributed another crucial perspective to the debate. This is important because there was the paradox of comparative science without comparisons: By claiming that the Romans were exceptionally bellicose, one is making a statement that requires a basis for comparison, but this issue had been neglected.

Of course, it is well known how many wars had been fought in the Greek world, and of course the many pieces of evidence for the Greek's appreciation of military glory are well known, too. And it is no secret that Athenian democracy had its origin in a total mobilization and militarization of the society.

But such evidence had not yet been discussed in context, performing a comparison including Rome, her Italian neighbors, the Greek states and other states in the ancient world. By providing this perspective for the first time, rather than focusing on the Romans in isolation, Eckstein enables to see Roman militarism in a new light. The so-called exceptional features appear typical for all members of a violent ancient interstate system without supra-national institutions to maintain peace or settle conflicts.

According to Eckstein, the central question is not then why the Romans made war so often, rather, why they were successful in creating a "large and durable territorial polity when so many other city-states failed at that task." His answer is essentially equal to Cornell's conclusion, it was their ability to assimilate outsiders.

The Greek poleis, in contrast, tended toward "virulent exclusivity" and tried to restrict access to their citizenry as far as possible. For them, it would have been completely unthinkable to do what the Romans did: To give their citizen rights not only to the Latins, who at least shared the common language and culture, but also to real aliens such as the Etruscans, who were not even native speakers of Latin.

So Rome could outgrow all competitors in Italy by absorbing ever more allies into her political system, but merely absorbing them would not have been sufficient. Decisive was the fact that the system proved stable even in the face of major crises, and this was due to a policy that maintained at least a minimum amount of consent among the allies.

The importance of this aspect can be seen by comparison with other powerful city-states who built alliance systems that were, in principle, comparable to the Roman one, but which were beset by dissent and separatism, such as Carthage or Athens. The fact that alliance systems were vulnerable to tensions between the allies was common knowledge, and when Hannibal invaded Italy during the Second Punic War, part of his strategy was the assumption that he would be welcomed as a liberator and that the Roman alliance system would fall apart. But the system remained intact, much to Hannibal's disappointment.

This system enabled the Romans in a first step to create a stable hegemony in Italy. But this is not yet world domination, and the second step was the involvement of Rome in the affairs of the eastern Mediterranean from the 2nd century BC onwards. This involvement finally gave rise to a unified Mediterranean world dominated by Rome, either by direct

territorial incorporation as a *provincia*, or by means of treaties and alliances. This took place over the course of more than 300 years, but there is an underlying common mechanism.

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According to Eckstein, the trigger were Greek calls for help against the kings Philip V of Macedon and the Seleucid Antiochos III. The network of treaties and alliances that finally led to the Macedonian Wars and the War against the Seleucid kingdom is too entangled to be discussed in detail here; a number of major and minor powers with various conflicts sorted themselves effectively into two large blocks. A crucial driving force for the outbreak of the Second Macedonian War were the Aitolians, who had a long-standing conflict with Macedon and who had a major interest in getting the Romans involved.

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When this happened and the Romans defeated Philip V, the Aitolians were not satisfied, however. They had hoped for a large territorial increase at the cost of Macedon, which the Romans refused to concede them. The Romans tried to establish a peace order that maintained the status quo before the war. The Aitolians therefore switched alliances and induced now Antiochos III to make war in mainland Greece.

So we have a basic mechanism of large networks of linked powers, linked by long-term treaties or immediate calls for help. It was an interstate system where hostile diplomacy, armed conflict and the switching of sides were frequent, and the growth of ever larger systems of alliances created the danger that even small internal conflicts within a single city could become a major war. There is nothing specific Roman here, these are features of the ancient interstate system at large.

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The prehistories of the Persian Wars and the Peloponnesian War illustrate the universality of this mechanism. The Persian Wars started with the Ionian Revolt, which ultimately started from internal dissent on the island of Naxos, and finally led to a clash between the whole Greek world and the Persian Empire. During the course of these events, Aristagoras, ruler of Miletos, switched alliances and transmuted from an ally of the Persians into their enemy.

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The Peloponnesian war similarly started with conflicts in the small city of Epidamnos. Kerkyra had refused to provide help for their own colony Epidamnos, but when Epidamnos turned to Korinthos instead, they regarded this as an offence, since they saw Epidamos as their possession. The escalating events finally caused a war between the two largest powers of

the Greek world, Athens and Sparta.

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Seen in the light of these events, the outbreak of the Second Punic War is not the perfect illustration of Roman imperialism as which it is usually presented. Rather, it shows just the features that appear familiar from the examples above: In the Iberian city of Saguntum, there was internal dissent and one party appealed to the Romans, making them the protector of the city. When a war between Saguntum and the tribe of the Turdetani broke out, the latter appealed to Hannibal, while the Saguntines sent envoys to Rome, and now the whole system was ready for a major war.

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But why then did the large states agree to be drawn into the messy affairs of minor powers? They knew that far-ranging and destructive wars could ensue, and they frequently also knew that the legal justification for their intervention was weak, as in the case of Athenian help for Kerkyra as well as of Roman help for Saguntum. But the irresistible benefits from the perspective of the large powers were always the same:

- Reputation – it conferred prestige to be a widely accepted helper and arbitrator, and international prestige is a value in itself (for ancient as well as for modern governments).
- Increased radius of operations – these calls for help were an optimum pretext for promoting ones own interests in distant regions, spoils of war and other material benefits included.
- Competition – if you decline this request for an alliance, someone else will accept it and reap the benefits in your place.

So in these respects, Rome is typical rather than exceptional. But it was the rise of Rome to the single dominant power in the Mediterranean that effectively ended this violent interstate system with its frequent wars and destabilizing alliances.

Without doubt, Roman domination brought its own adverse effects with it. In particular, outside of Italy the Romans did not continue their system of alliances without tribute payments, rather, they imposed taxation on their provinces abroad, and the tax burden was the most important cause for the riots. But in the overall balance, the empire remained remarkably stable and the benefits of the pax Romana seem to have been real, rather than being perceived as mere propaganda. Among the reasons for the empire's stability, one aspect stands out: The removal of the background of constant warfare brought in itself substantial economic benefits and enabled a period of general prosperity.

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Part 4: How to run an empire?

The power and influence of Rome grew in a piecemeal fashion, as the sum of many individual episodes. And the patchy nature of the Roman possessions continued in the imperial era, when territories with different legal status became collectively called the Imperium Romanum.

The best approximation of a legal definition in modern terms describes the empire as an alliance of cities with Rome as the senior partner. The administrative structure reflects the mode of growth of the empire, and it had three levels: the cities with considerable local autonomy, the provinces, and finally the emperor. The latter two represent the “imperial” or “Roman” administration of the empire, but it is difficult to say what this really means: Our sources do not explicitly explain the workings of the imperial administration. But what we do know positively is that the bureaucratic apparatus was very small by modern standards: There were no large bureaucracies, neither in Rome nor in the provinces. The emperor ruled with the help of a limited number of friends, advisers, and secretaries. This system of minimal government was repeated by the governors in the provinces, who also had only a small staff. Some scholars have even denied that the modern notion of an administration applies to the Imperium Romanum.

I have claimed that the empire cannot be understood in terms of a modern state, and I think by now it becomes evident what this means. To further investigate these issues, we will look at the topic of Roman strategy.

The problem is this: There were no general headquarters of the army, no ministry of defense or state department, no secret services, no permanent embassies or professional diplomats, no institutes for political science, no think-tanks or military academies. The whole institutional framework that in a modern state is essential for formulating the strategic aims was lacking.

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Nevertheless, Edward Luttwak published his “Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire” in 1976, and the debate about Roman strategy goes back to this work. He has analyzed the military arrangements, in particular with respect to the borders, and he sees three distinct phases of Roman strategy:

- Phase 1 in the time of Julio-Claudian emperors: The system is based on client states and mobile armies, a broad buffer zone provides security.

- Phase 2 from the Flavians till the Severans: A system of “scientific frontiers”, i.e. short frontiers selected for optimum defensive qualities. The empire becomes a fortress with precisely defined perimeter and limes fortifications.
- Phase 3 in the later 3rd century until Diocletian: The fixed frontiers are abandoned and replaced by defense in depth, with mobile armies located in the interior.

Some facts are uncontroversial. For instance, a number of semi-independent kingdoms were successively transformed into provinces in the first century. However, the majority of scholars has denied the existence of clear and elaborate systems of Roman strategic planning.

Any discussion on the Grand Strategy of the Romans must start with the basic evidence: The number of troops, the borders of the empire, the distribution of the troops within that territory. But the problems start already here: We do not know, for instance, which factors limited the size of the Roman army, since ancient sources do not discuss these matters. In general, it is assumed in modern scholarship that financial, rather than demographic or political reasons set the limit for a comparatively small army of about 300.000 men under Augustus. But this is just conjecture.

And then, as mentioned, the notion of a coherent Grand Strategy suffers also from the problem that the required institutions were not there. Implementing a strategic doctrine in the modern sense would have required the collection, colligation and evaluation of large amounts of information – it is unclear who should have done this.

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Another problem is the issue of maps. Looking at the Roman empire from a birds eye perspective, as we can do using modern maps or satellite pictures, certain features appear rational, such as the use of deserts, mountain ranges or large rivers for defining the borders. But is unknown whether this way of looking at things on a large scale was available at all to the Romans, since it is contentious whether they had maps comparable to modern ones.

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Since our sources do not tell explicitly if and how maps were used for strategic purposes, other approaches are needed. Christian Hänger has analyzed ancient sources with respect to the geographical knowledge of the acting persons, insofar as it can be inferred indirectly from the text. As Hänger has shown, the geographical knowledge of Roman generals themselves must have been much better than the fragments found in the historians’ accounts. The choice of optimum marching routes and so on betrays familiarity with the area of operations. So according to Hänger, the Roman commanders must have possessed at least precise mental maps. This is not yet proving the existence of physical maps, but it makes

them plausible in any case.

This may cure one important moot point of Luttwak's theory, but this does not end the discussion. One of the most severe criticisms came from Benjamin Isaac, who has offered an alternative explanation for the military arrangements of the Roman empire. Isaac denies a Grand Strategy and a defensive organization of Roman troops altogether. His major issue is not the technical feasibility of Roman overall strategy, rather, he sees a completely different motivation at work: According to him, the Roman army served mainly aggressive purposes, to enable the emperors to celebrate themselves as triumphant conquerors, and also as an instrument of extortion and oppression of the subjected peoples. The influence of Harris' views appears obvious.

Isaac's perspective seems limited, because his conclusions on one particular area, the Roman Near East, cannot provide a model for the interpretation of the empire as a whole, with borders in vastly differing regions of the world, facing a multitude of different local conditions and challenges. The Near East was the place of revolts such as the Jewish War, but they are the exception rather than the norm. In general, the Roman empire is characterized by the rarity of riots that would be called separatist in modern parlance.

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A look at a modern map depicting the allocation of the legions demonstrates that large interior areas of the empire were almost military-free, in particular the peninsular areas of modern Spain, Greece, or Turkey. The army appears concentrated in two particular border regions, the northern one along Rhine and Danube, and the Eastern one. And the distribution appears remarkably stable over the course of two centuries. This allocation cannot be reconciled with suppression of internal riots being the only major purpose of the army.

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Leaving aside Isaac's denial of any defensive considerations on the part of the Romans, nevertheless a consensus seems to exist among the critics of Luttwak's theory. The attempt to transfer the modern concept of a coherent, systematic and long-term strategic overall planning is generally seen as failed. So rather than assuming long-term and "scientific" planning, we should see Roman decisions as frequently being ad hoc and opportunistic, based on the personal idiosyncrasies of individual emperors. It was in particular Fergus Millar who stressed the personalized form of Roman government, where the individual preferences of emperors necessarily became a major determinant of Roman politics and warfare.

And these preferences were not always of a "rational" or "objective" nature with

respect to the situation of the empire and its strategic needs. Rather, ideology and tradition, thinking in terms of glory and precedent, played a large role. The desire of Roman emperors to emulate Alexander the Great defies the attempt to analyze it using tools of modern strategic studies, but exactly this desire was one major reason for the repeated wars between Rome and her eastern neighbors.

Nevertheless, Kimberly Kagan has warned that one should not overstretch the criticism of Luttwak's book and she pointed out that when the definition of Grand Strategy becomes too narrow, it finally becomes useless even for discussing the behavior of modern states. In particular, she noted that the crucial aspect is not discussing how far the Romans conformed to modern definitions of strategy. Rather, one should look at what they actually did. For instance, the emperors took care to maintain a sufficient defensive strength of border garrisons, even when some legions were moved off to another theater of war.

Besides such troop movements within the empire, one may add the issue of bridges as another example: For long stretches of time, there were no bridges across the two major border rivers in Europe, the Rhine and the Danube, despite of the Romans' technical expertise to build them. The function of large rivers as an obstacle for barbarian intruders was obviously esteemed.

So in conclusion, it is clear on one hand that the Romans were not completely blind to reality, they included issues of defense and security into their plans. On the other hand, the central concept that the Romans followed coherent and rational strategic systems with long-term and centralized planning is rejected. In particular, the concept of a succession of three distinct, clearly defined military doctrines is generally seen as the weakest point of Luttwak's analysis. The shape of the Empire, as it emerged during its history, may look rational to us, with respect to the choice of river borders and so on, but it is in the end a product of chance, the accumulation of numerous decisions which were made for a whole range of different reasons. What we have here, in effect, is a beautiful analogy to biological evolution: It may look like a product of rational design, but it is a product of chance nevertheless.