

History 392 for **Fall 2011**

Ruling Strategies, or How Did the Romans Control Their Empire ?

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For as long as two and a half centuries at the start of the Christian era, Rome was able to maintain a vast but surprisingly stable empire centered upon the Mediterranean. It stretched onwards through north-west Europe to lowland Scotland, and through Asia Minor to the Euphrates river, as well as spanning North Africa from the Atlantic to the Red Sea. The population is estimated at 50 to 60 million, “a bafflingly diverse throng” (as one modern scholar terms it), “speaking many different languages, and living their lives in infinitely varied ways.” There was a large standing army – approximately 300,000 men, stationed along remote frontiers for the most part – but Rome’s corps of civil administrators was tiny. It is only natural to enquire, therefore, what various means were employed to subdue the population, as well as to conciliate it and cement its loyalty. The question can and should be asked about any ruling power, but it has particular point in the Romans’ case, because their empire at its peak was so extensive and so long-lasting, and (right down to today) it has never lacked for admirers.

Investigation and appreciation of Roman ruling strategies are the goals of our seminar, therefore. There is a remarkable diversity to explore, much of it double-edged (what pleases some of Rome’s subjects only alienates others):

‘fear factor’ – the capacity and reputation of the Roman army to terrify and to obliterate its opponents;
‘tolerance factor’ – Roman disinclination to micromanage or to impose Roman ways or to restrict movement, hence allowing potentially subversive attitudes to spread, as through the Second Sophistic and Christianity;
‘Romanization’ – spread of Latin language, Roman practices (e.g. baths, games), religion, values, and their assimilation with other cultures (a two-way process);
personal concern and patronage on the part of an all-powerful yet approachable emperor, and the opportunity to express gratitude by worshipping him (within limits);
rule of law, with courts empire-wide, as well as appeal procedures even against alleged Roman misrule;
rewarding of supportive local elites, whose dominance is upheld;
inclusiveness and advancement in status, especially to Roman citizenship (above all through manumission and army service), and even to the Roman senate;
economic benefits of peace – allocation of land, urbanization, paved highways and other public works, suppression of bandits and pirates, monetization;
projection of Roman strength (material and organizational), confidence, pride, trustworthiness through architecture, art, fortifications, literature, monuments.

Our successive aims as a seminar group are *first* to gain a sense of the historical and cultural context, and to investigate together a range of illustrative strategies; *then*, having formulated

individual research projects, to share the discoveries and difficulties arising as the research proceeds; and *finally*, by pooling our accumulated expertise, to risk shaping answers, however tentative and imperfect, to the big questions that have emerged.

Knowledge of Greek or Latin is not required. Most ancient source material is available in English translation, and for most topics there is up-to-date scholarship in English.