

Lust for Conquest:
Why did Rome Win an Empire

by: R.L. Porter

By examining the nature of Roman expansion and conquest in the middle Republican period (c. 264-146 B.C.) it is possible to shed some light on forces still at work in the world today. Nowadays two super powers, the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R., are locked in rivalry over which should have the greater influence. This rivalry manifests itself in many ways, most notably in the extension of extra-territorial power. Thus we see the U.S.A. interfering in Nicaragua and the Philippines, while the Soviet Union involves itself in Afghanistan and Angola. The background and motives for Roman imperial expansion are not at all out of line with the forces which drive the great powers to similar exertions in the 1980's.

Rome by 270 B.C. was domina (mistress) of an Italy internally united by unrepressive military alliances. Her allies in Italy were socii and they were obliged to Rome by Treaties (foedera) to assist Rome in military endeavours of necessity. Rome first went across the straits of Messina into Sicily in 264 B.C. to combat a recent "perceived" threat of Carthaginian expansion into the waters just south of the Italian toe. After a military victory in 241 Rome vacillated over the administration of the newly won possession, eventually turning it into a province (provincia), though not until 227 B.C. putting it under the charge of a praetor in residence. Even then the Romans allowed the kingdom of Syracuse to remain an independent ally in east Sicily until Syracuse proved treacherous during the Second Punic War and was incorporated into the province in 211 B.C. - 30 years after the initial Roman victory on the island! Because the Romans did not highly esteem the fighting qualities of the Sicilians the system of military support alliances was not extended into

Sicily and the island became a tribute paying zone. Rome's motives were basically motives of security and not greed nor lust for conquest. Otherwise why not have taken Syracuse over immediately?

In the subsequent period Rome moved eastward across the Adriatic Sea into the Greek peninsula. Her initial reason this time was the suppression of pirates operating out of the Illyrian kingdom, an operation terminated successfully in 228. As H.H. Scullard puts it, "The slowness with which she entered upon the war and the conditions she imposed after it are sufficient to disprove the theory that she (Rome) deliberately cultivated an aggressive eastern policy" (A History of the Roman World 753 to 146 B.C. p. 193). Indeed this was to prove true again and again as Rome fought Philip V of Macedon, then Antiochus of Syria, then Perseus of Macedon as well as others until by 146 she was ascendant throughout the entire Mediterranean world without apparently ever concocting some grand scheme of universal conquest. She in fact lurched haphazardly from crisis to crises until all potential enemies appeared to have vanished from sight.

E. Gruen has just written a fascinating two-volume work entitled The Hellenistic World and the Coming of Rome (U. of California Press, 1984). His work bolsters the idea of a Rome which not only was not scheming for conquest but was ready to afford to other Mediterranean powers a wide scope for real independence as long as this did not lead to threats against Rome or her interests. Even small and weak states such as the island republic of Rhodes were afforded much leeway. In abandoning the use of the Italian system of militarily obliged socii foederati (treaty allies), Rome was

able to use amicitia (friendship - the Greek philia) as a more flexible means - and one less binding on both parties - of extending her diplomatic influence. Far from being an iron-clad agreement, amicitia basically just indicated friendly relations and intentions. Such diplomatic instruments well suited Rome's unplanned and informal growth of power before 146.

In the final analysis it probably mattered little whether Rome bullied her way to empire as a malignant growth or not. Whether because of Rome's desire for security or a lust for power, small states such as Rhodes ended up losing their freedom and became subjects to the Roman super power.

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