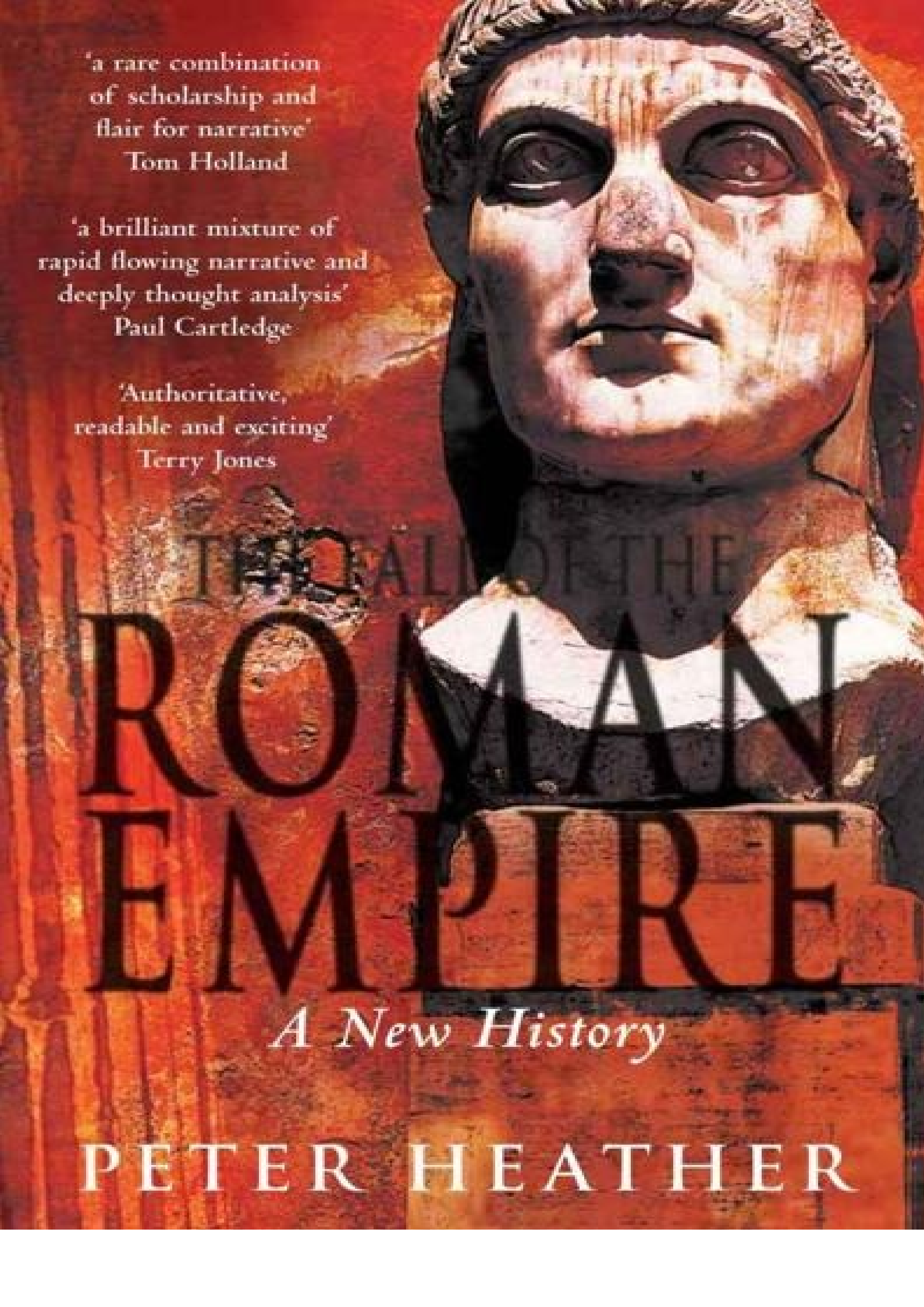


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THE
ROMAN
EMPIRE

A New History

PETER HEATHER

PETER HEATHER

THE FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

PAN BOOKS

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PART ONE

PAX ROMANA

ROMANS

EARLY WINTER IN 54 BC: a typically wet, grey November day in eastern Belgium. In a Roman military camp on the site of modern-day Tongres, close to where the borders of Belgium, Holland and Germany now meet, a council of war was under way. One full legion – ten cohorts notionally of 5000 men apiece – and five additional cohorts had been brigaded together in winter quarters here, just to the west of the Rhine in the territory of a small Germanic-speaking tribe called the Eburones. At the end of each campaigning season, Julius Caesar's standard practice was to disperse his legions to fortified encampments. The legionaries constructed these themselves, according to a standard pattern: ditch, rampart and defensive towers on the outside, barrack blocks within. The length of the wall was dictated by an ancient formula: two hundred times the square root of the number of cohorts to be accommodated. Subdued tribes in the immediate neighbourhood were responsible for supplying the troops through the winter, until the grass grew again to support the pack animals, and campaigning could begin anew.

At first, all had gone well. The Roman force was led to its encampment by the two kings of the Eburones, Ambiorix and the rather older Catuvoleus. The fort was built on time, and the Eburones brought in the first food supplies. But about three weeks later, things started to go wrong. Encouraged by stirrings of revolt elsewhere, and roused by Indutiomarus, leader of the much more numerous Treveri, a neighbouring tribe from the Moselle valley, some Eburones ambushed and wiped out a small Roman foraging party. They then rushed the Roman ramparts, but quickly withdrew under a hail of missiles. The atmosphere in the Roman camp was suddenly uneasy, and it quickly intensified. Ambiorix and Catuvoleus set up a parley, both claiming that a bunch of hotheads was responsible for the attack, while Ambiorix in particular was keen to portray himself as a committed Roman ally. He said that a major revolt was certainly in the offing, with huge numbers of hired Germani about to descend on Gaul from east of the Rhine. It was not for him to tell the Roman commanders what to do, he pointed out, but if they wanted to concentrate their forces against the attack, he would guarantee the brigade a safe passage to either of two other legionary encampments situated about fifty miles away – one to the south-east, the other to the south-west.

Matters could not have gone better had Ambiorix written the script himself. The Roman force was commanded by a pair of legates, Quintus Titurius Sabinus and Lucius Aurunculeius Cotta. The council of war was long and rancorous. Cotta and some of his senior subordinates were determined to stay put. They had food, and the camp was fully entrenched; Caesar would send reinforcements as soon as he heard of the revolt – and Gaul was famous for the speed with which rumour could travel. Sabinus, however, argued that the natives would not have dared to revolt if Caesar had not already left for Italy. Goodness only knew when news of the revolt would reach him, and the legions, dispersed as they were in their separate winter quarters, faced the prospect of being wiped out piecemeal. For Sabinus, therefore, the offer of safe passage had to be accepted. There was no time to lose. He was also influenced by the fact that the fort contained the least experienced of Caesar's legions, enrolled only the previous spring, and used as baggage guards in the major battles of the last campaigning season. The council continued, with tempers frayed and voices raised, Sabinus deliberately letting Cotta

to the soldiers that a plan that would lead them quickly to safety was being ignored. Around midnight Cotta gave way. The most important thing for morale was to maintain a united front among the officers. Hurriedly the legionaries prepared to leave, and at dawn they were off. Believing that Ambiorix had spoken as a friend, the Roman force left in marching, not battle, order, an extended column carrying most of its heavy baggage.

Two miles outside the camp, the route passed through thick woods and down into a deep valley. Before the advance guard had climbed up the other side, and while the bulk of the column was strung out along the valley floor, the trap was sprung. Eburones appear above them on either side and deluged the Romans with missiles. The fighting is drawn out, but the victory of the Eburones total. By dawn the next day, only a few Roman stragglers who went to ground in the chaos are left alive. The vast majority of the seven thousand-plus men who built their camp just weeks before are dead. A brutal sequence of events, and startling in their unexpectedness. Not the fate you'd expect to be meted out to any of the army of Julius Caesar, famous for that most grandiose of boasts: *veni vidi vici* – 'I came, I saw, I conquered.'

The action, however, bears closer inspection. While this particular Roman force was overwhelmed, the details of the engagement graphically demonstrate the astonishing fighting capacities of the legionary soldier on which the Roman Empire itself was built. Sabinus lost his head as the ambush began: not surprising in a commander who must have realized immediately that he had led his men into a death-trap. Cotta fared better. He'd smelt a rat all along and taken what precautions he could. When the missiles started flying, he and his senior centurions quickly pulled the drawn-out column into a square, abandoning the baggage. Now orders could be given and the cohorts manoeuvred as a unit, even though the tactical position was entirely against them. Ambiorix had the height advantage and sufficient control of his followers to use it. The Eburones avoided hand-to-hand fighting for several hours, simply pouring down missiles from above: spears, arrows, sling bullets. The Roman casualties rapidly mounted; every time a cohort made an ordered sortie to left or right in an attempt to get to grips with their tormentors, they exposed themselves to raking fire from the rear. Trapped, their strength ebbing away, the Roman force held on for an extraordinary eight hours. At that point Sabinus tried to parley with Ambiorix, but Romans did not discuss terms with an armed enemy. Sabinus growled Cotta, despite having been hit full in the face by a sling bullet. Sabinus was struck down while still talking, and this was the signal for the Eburones to charge down for the kill. Many legionaries fought and died with Cotta in the valley bottom, but some still kept formation and made their way back to the camp two miles away. There the survivors kept the Eburones out until nightfall, and then, to a man, committed suicide rather than fall into the hands of the enemy. If the baggage guard would fight all day with no hope of success and commit mass suicide rather than surrender, Rome's enemies were going to be in serious trouble.¹

The Rise of Imperial Rome

IF THE ROOTS OF Roman imperial power lay firmly in the military might of its legions, the cornerstone of their astonishing fighting spirit can be attributed to their training. As with all elite military formations – ancient and modern – discipline was ferocious. With no courts of human rights to worry about, instructors were at liberty to beat the disobedient – to death if necessary. And if a whole cohort disobeyed orders, the punishment was decimation: every tenth man flogged to death in front of his comrades. But you can never base morale on fear exclusively, and group cohesion was also generated by more positive methods. Recruits trained together, fought together and played together in groups.

eight: a *contubernium* (literally, a group sharing a tent). And they were taken young: all armies preferred young men with plenty of testosterone. Legionaries were also denied regular sexual contact: wives and children might make them think twice about the risks of battle. Basic training was gruelling. You had to learn to march 36 kilometres in five hours, weighed down with 25 kilos or more of armour and equipment. All the time you were being told how special you were, how special your friends were, what an elite force you belonged to. Just like the Marines, but much nastier.

The result of all this was groups of super-fit young men, partly brutalized and therefore brutalized themselves, closely bonded with one another though denied other strong emotional ties, and taking triumphant pride in the unit to which they belonged. This was symbolized in the religious oaths sworn to the unit standards, the legendary eagles. On successful graduation, the legionary vowed on his life and honour to follow the eagles and never desert them, even in death. Such was the determination not to let the standards fall into enemy hands that one of Cotta's standard bearers, Lucius Petrosidius, hurled his eagle over the rampart at Tongres as he himself was struck down, rather than let it be captured. The honour of the unit, and the bond with fellow soldiers, became the most important element in a legionary's life, sustaining a fighting spirit and willingness to obey orders which few opponents could match.

To this psychological and physical conditioning, Roman training added first-rate practical skills. Roman legionaries were well armed by the standards of the day, but possessed no secret weapons. Much of their equipment was copied from their neighbours: the legionary's distinctive and massive shield – the *scutum* – for instance, from the Celts. But they were carefully trained to make the best use of it. Individually, they were taught to despise wild swinging blows with the sword. These were to be parried with the shield, and the legionary's characteristic short sword – the *gladius* – brought up in a short stabbing motion into the side of an opponent exposed by his own swing. Legionaries were also equipped with defensive armour, and this, plus the weapons training, gave them a huge advantage in hand-to-hand combat.

Throughout Caesar's wars in Gaul, therefore, his troops were able to defeat much larger opposition forces; Ambiorix was well advised to keep his Eburones from rushing down from the heights until eight hours' worth of missiles had greatly reduced Roman numbers. On a larger scale, legions were trained to manoeuvre as units, receiving their orders by bugle call and maintaining their cohesion even in the chaos of battle. As a result, any Roman commander worth his salt could deliver maximum force when opportunity presented itself, and retreat in good order if necessary. Disciplined, coherent forces have a massive advantage over even very large numbers of ferocious opponents acting as individuals, and it was only the ultimate tactical disadvantage of being trapped in a valley that prevented Cotta from bringing his cohorts to bear with telling effect. On more even ground, on another occasion, just 300 legionaries who had been cut off were able to defend themselves for hours against 6,000 opponents at the cost of only a few wounded.²

A Roman legion also had other skills. Learning to build, and build quickly, was a standard element of training: roads, fortified camps and siege engines were but a few of the tasks undertaken. On one occasion, Caesar put a pontoon bridge across the Rhine in just ten days, and quite small contingents of Roman troops regularly controlled large territories from their own defensive ramparts. Cotta's advice to stay put that November day might well have proved successful. Three years before, another Roman force, comprising just eight cohorts, had been sent to overwinter in an Alpine valley at the headwaters of the River Rhône above Lake Geneva, because Caesar was looking to secure the

Bernard Pass. Confronted with an enemy that massively outnumbered them, they used the fortifications and tactical nous to inflict such a defeat on their attackers that they were subsequently able to effect an unharassed withdrawal.

The legions' building skills could be just as effectively employed in offensive siege warfare, most famously in subduing Alesia, hill-fort and headquarters of the great Gallic leader Vercingetorix. Here, over a circuit of 14 miles, Caesar's legions dug three concentric sets of ditches facing inwards, the one 20 feet wide and deep, the other two 15 feet – full of booby-traps of various lethal kinds, backed by the standard ramp and palisade 12 feet high, topped with battlements and studded with towers at 80-foot intervals. When a Gallic relief force came to raise the siege, a similar set of barricades was added facing outwards. As a result, the Romans were able to prevent many attempts by their more numerous opponents to break in or out, fighting always with tactical advantage, the fortifications giving them sufficient time to rush reserves to the threatened spots. At another siege, that of the seemingly impregnable Gallic fort at Uxellodunum, Caesar used a tenstorey tower on a massive ram together with underground mines, to deny the defenders access to the mountain spring which was the only source of water, and so compelled their surrender.

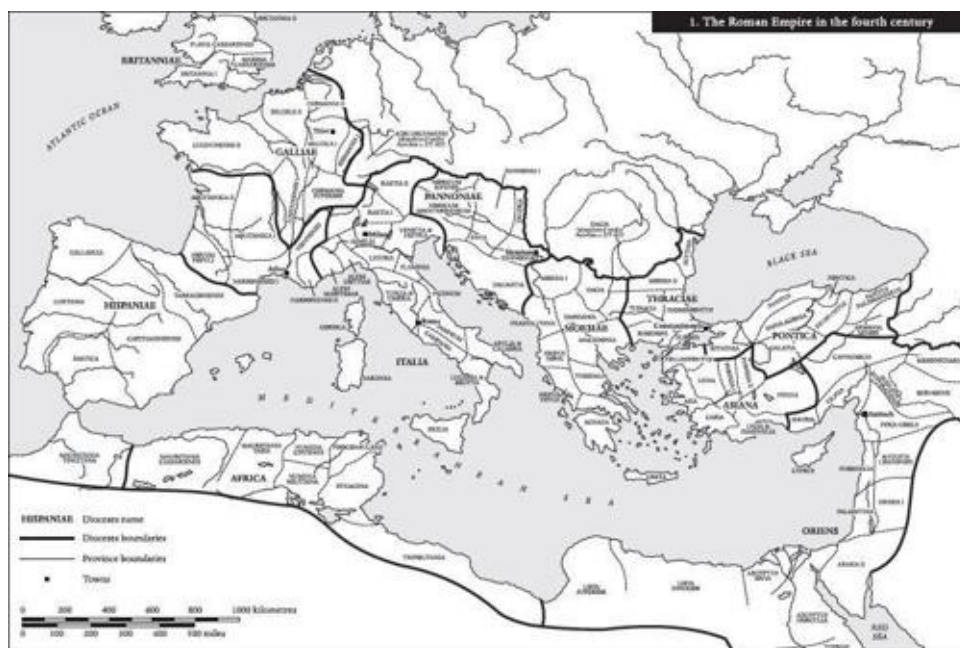
If the Roman legion in combat was a professional killing-machine, it was also much more. Its building capacity could turn immediate military victory into the long-term domination of territories and regions: a strategic weapon on which an empire could be built.³

Caesar's campaigns in Gaul belong to a relatively late phase in Rome's rise to imperial domination. It had started life as one city-state among many, struggling first for survival and then for local hegemony in central and southern Italy. The city's origins are shrouded in myth, as are the details of many of its early local wars. Something is known of these struggles from the late sixth century BC, however, and they continued periodically down to the early third century, when Rome's dominance over its home sphere was established by the capitulation of the Etruscans in 283, and the defeat of the Greek city-states of southern Italy in 275. As winner of its local qualifiers, Rome graduated to regional matches against Carthage, the other major power of the western Mediterranean. The first of the so-called Punic wars lasted from 264 to 241 BC, and ended with the Romans turning Sicily into their first province. It took two further wars, spanning 218–202 and 149–146, for Carthaginian power finally to be crushed, but victory left Rome unchallenged in the western Mediterranean, and added North Africa and Spain to its existing power-base. At the same time, Roman power also began to spread more widely. Macedonia was conquered in 167 BC and direct rule over Greece was established from the 140s. This presaged the assertion of Roman hegemony over all the rich hinterlands of the eastern Mediterranean. By about 100 BC, Cilicia, Phrygia, Lydia, Caria and many of the other provinces of Asia Minor were in Roman hands. Others quickly followed. The circle of Mediterranean domination was completed by Pompey's annexation of Seleucid Syria in 64 BC, and Octavian's of Egypt in 30 BC.

The Mediterranean and its coastlands were always the main focus of Rome's imperial ambition, but to secure them, it soon proved necessary to move the legions north of the Alps into northern Mediterranean Europe. The assertion of Roman dominion over the Celts of northern Italy was followed in short order by the creation in the 120s BC of the province of Gallia Narbonensis, essentially Mediterranean France. This new territory was required to defend northern Italy, since mountain ranges – even high ones – do not by themselves a frontier make, as Hannibal had proved. In the late republican and early imperial periods, roughly the fifty years either side of the birth of Christ,

the Empire also continued to grow because of the desire of individual leaders for self-glorification. By this date, conquest overseas had become a recognized route to power in Rome, so that conquest continued into areas that were neither so profitable, nor strategically vital. Thanks to Julius Caesar, a part of Gaul fell under Roman sway between 58 and 50 BC. Further conquests followed under his nephew and adopted successor Octavian, better known as Augustus, the first of the Roman emperors. By 15 BC the legionaries' hob-nailed sandals were moving into the Upper and Middle Danube regions – roughly modern Bavaria, Austria and Hungary. Some of these lands had long belonged to Roman client kingdoms but now they were turned into provinces and brought under direct control. By 9 BC all the territory as far as the River Danube had been annexed, and an arc of territory around the Alpine passes into Italy added to the Empire. For the next thirty years or so, its north European boundary moved back and forth towards the River Elbe, before the difficulty of conquering the forests of Germany led to the abandonment of ambitions east of the Rhine. In AD 43, under Claudius, the conquest of Britain was begun, and the old Thracian kingdom (the territory of modern Bulgaria and beyond) was formally incorporated into the Empire as a province some three years later. The northern frontiers finally came to rest on the lines of two great rivers – the Rhine and the Danube – and there they broadly remained for the rest of the Empire's history.⁴

The Roman military system and Rome's acquisitions were thus the product of centuries of warfare; military force alone, however, was not enough to build an empire. Throughout, it had also been combined with targeted diplomacy and, where necessary, total ruthlessness. On several occasions Caesar treated his Gallic captives with great clemency, sending them home if he thought it was in Rome's interests. He was likewise always careful not to overstretch the loyalty of Gallic groups who had surrendered to him, imposing only moderate demands for auxiliaries and food supplies. He would also happily deploy his legions to protect new allies from the aggression of any third party. Given this relatively moderate stance, many Gallic groups were quick to take the point that cooperation was likely to prove more profitable than confrontation. Such tactics had long been employed, so that the military business of Roman empire-building was repeatedly punctuated by moments of diplomatic success. In 133 BC, for instance, Attalus III, the last independent ruler of the rich Hellenistic kingdom of Pergamum in modern north-west Turkey, bequeathed his state to Rome in his will.



Conciliatory diplomacy only achieved such successes, though, because it was offered in select cases against a backdrop of well controlled and ruthless brutality. After the Third Punic War, which

finally humbled the power of Carthage, the Roman Senate decreed that the entire city should be eradicated from the map. The site was ploughed symbolically with salt to prevent its future occupation. Further east, Rome's greatest enemy was Mithradates VI Eupator Dionysus, king of Pontus, who at one point ruled most of modern Turkey and the northern Black Sea coast. He was responsible for the atrocity known as the Asian Vespers, when thousands of resident Romans and Italians were killed in the territories under his rule. It took a while, but three separate campaigns – the Mithradatic Wars – finally, by 63 BC, saw the once proud king reduced to a last redoubt in the Crimea. There he decided to take his own life: but since years of preventive practice had inured him to poison, he had to ask one of his guardsmen to run him through.

Caesar's approach to the Gallic problem could be equally implacable. Opposition leaders held responsible for fomenting trouble were flogged to death – the punishment meted out to Acco, leader of the Gallic Senones and Cornuti at the end of the campaigning season of 53 BC. Whole opposition groups who failed to surrender as the legions approached might be sold into slavery or even, on occasion, simply slaughtered. In 52 BC, Caesar was held up for a while by a sustained defence of the hill-fort at Avaricum, an action following on from a massacre of Roman traders and their families. When the defences were finally breached, the legions were set loose to massacre and pillage; reportedly only 800 people survived from a total population of 40,000 men, women and children. Here, as always, there is no way of knowing by how much Caesar exaggerated his figures, but there is also no doubting the ferocity with which the Romans cowed their opponents.⁵

ALSO, THEY NEVER forgave or forgot. The same ruthlessness was duly deployed to avenge the deaths of Cotta and his men. Later spotted leading some siege operations, Indutiomarus of the Treveri was singled out for a cavalry sortie, which cut him down. As for the Eburones, they were forced to scatter in the face of a sustained assault on their homelands in the next campaigning season. Rather than wasting the lives of his own troopers in flushing them out of the woods, Caesar magnanimously issued a general invitation to neighbouring tribes to come and join in the pillaging. All of their villages were burned, and many of them died in the numerous skirmishes. The Eburones' king, Catuvoleus, had soon had enough. As Caesar reports it, 'Finding that he could not endure the effort of war or flight, [he] cursed Ambiorix by all his gods for suggesting such a project, and hanged himself from a yew tree. It's quite possible that if he hadn't hanged himself, someone else would have done it for him. As for Ambiorix, he survived on the run for several years and his fate is not recorded in Caesar's *Gallic Wars*. Our last glimpse of him comes in 51 BC, when a further Roman force pillaged and burned the territory of the Eburones, with the specific object of making Ambiorix so hated that his own countrymen would deal with him themselves.⁶

Such stick-and-carrot policy combinations were hardly the work of genius, but they didn't need to be. When combined with the legions at this juncture in western Eurasian history, they were a sufficient tool for building an empire.

Rome thus created a vast state which, on the longest diagonal, ran from Hadrian's Wall on the border between England and Scotland to Mesopotamia where the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates flowed a distance of about 4,000 kilometres. On the other, a relatively trifling 2,000 kilometres separated Roman installations at the mouth of the Rhine from guard posts in the Atlas Mountains of North Africa. The Roman Empire was also long-lived. Not counting a brief Transylvanian adventure (which lasted a mere 150 years), Rome ran this territory in pretty much its entirety for a staggering 450 years from the age of Augustus to the fifth century AD. With events so far in the past, any real sense of time

can get lost. It is worth pausing for just a moment to contemplate that counting back 450 years from today takes you to 1555, in British history just before Elizabeth I came to the throne; and, on a broad front, to a Europe seething with the religious turmoil of the Reformation. The Roman Empire lasted, in other words, for an immense period of time. And in both its size and its longevity, the military might of Rome's legions created the most successful state that this corner of the globe has ever known. It is, of course, the sheer extent of this success that has always made the study of its collapse so compelling.

The Empire's longevity leads us to another point of crucial importance. When you stop to think about it, it becomes immediately obvious that over so many centuries the Empire could not have remained unchanged. England has been a kingdom more or less continuously since the time of Elizabeth I, but has changed out of all recognition. So too the Roman Empire: 400-plus years of history turned the later Roman Empire of the fourth century AD into an animal that Julius Caesar would scarcely have recognized. These two factors have traditionally been linked, producing a school of thought that sees the major transformations worked out over these long imperial centuries as the root cause of the Empire's final collapse. Different historians have chosen to emphasize different transformations. For Edward Gibbon, famously, the Christianization of the Empire was a crucial moment, its pacifist ideologies sapping the fighting spirit of the Roman army and its theologians spreading a superstition which undermined the rationality of classical culture. In the twentieth century, there was a stronger tendency to concentrate on economic factors: A. H. M. Jones, for instance, argued in 1964 that the burden of taxation became so heavy in the fourth-century Empire that peasants were left with too little of their produce to ensure their families' survival.⁷

There is no doubt that in order to say anything sensible about Rome's fall, it is necessary to understand the internal changes that made the late Empire so different from its early counterpart. On the other hand, this book will argue that the view that Rome's own internal transformations had so weakened it by the fourth century that it was ready to collapse under its own weight in the fifth, has become unsustainable. The roots of fifth-century collapse must be sought elsewhere. To establish the fundamental starting-point, it is necessary to explore in some depth the workings of the later Roman Empire and the changes that created it. The place to begin is Rome itself.

'The Better Part of Humankind'

THE CITY REMAINED in the fourth century AD, as it had been in the time of Caesar, a sprawling imperial mass. Visitors came, as they do now, to admire its monuments: the forum, the Colosseum, the Senate and a string of imperial and private palaces. Roman rulers had endowed it with monuments to their glory: for instance, the carved column of Marcus Aurelius celebrating his victorious foreign wars in the second century, and, more recently, the arch of Constantine I, erected in the 310s to mark the emperor's victories over internal enemies. Its population, likewise, was in a strong sense still an imperial one, artificially swollen by a flow of revenues from the rest of the Empire. Rome numbered perhaps a million in the fourth century, whereas no more than a handful of other cities had more than 100,000 inhabitants, and most had under 10,000. Feeding this population was a constant headache, especially as large numbers still qualified for free daily donations of bread, olive oil and wine assigned to the city as the perquisites of conquest. The most striking reflection of the resulting supply problem is the still stunning remains of Rome's two port cities: Ostia and Tibur. One lot of docks was not enough to generate a sufficient through-put of food, so they built a second. The huge UNESCO-sponsored excavations at Carthage, capital of Roman North Africa, have illuminated the problem from

the other end, unearthing the massive harbour installations constructed there for loading the ships with the grain destined to supply the heart of the Empire.⁸

At the heart of the city, in every sense, stood the Senate, the political hub that had produced Caesar himself, together with most of his allies and opponents. In his day, the Senate numbered about nine hundred men, all of them rich landowners, ex-magistrates and their cronies from the immediate hinterland of the city. These were the patrician families who dominated the politics, culture and economics of republican Rome.⁹ The fourth-century Senate numbered few, if any, direct descendants of these old families. There was a simple reason for this. Monogamous marriage tends to produce a male heir for no more than three generations at a time. In natural circumstances, about 20 per cent of monogamous relationships will produce no children at all, and another 20 per cent all girls. Exceptions occur (most notably the Capetian royal family of medieval France, which produced male heirs in the direct line for over 600 years), but it's a fair bet that no fourth-century senatorial families led back directly through the male line to contemporaries of Julius Caesar. Indirectly, however, many were descended from the grandees of old – a number certainly claimed as much – and the patterns of their wealth indicate the same.

Of all late Roman senators, the best known to us, from his own writings, is a certain Quintus Aurelius Symmachus, whose adult life spanned the second half of the fourth century. The writings consist of seven speeches and about 900 letters, composed between 364 and his death in 402. Partly edited by the author himself, they were published posthumously by his son, and widely copied by monks in the Middle Ages as an exemplar of Latin style. The speeches have their own points of interest, some of which will concern us later in the chapter, but the letter collection is fascinating for the sheer number of its correspondents and for the light it sheds on different aspects of the lifestyle of the late Romans of Rome. Symmachus himself was hugely wealthy and entirely typical of his class in having a portfolio of landed estates dotted across central and southern Italy, Sicily and North Africa; others of his peers owned estates in Spain and southern Gaul as well.¹⁰ The Sicilian and North African elements of this portfolio reflect the gains made in these areas by old Roman grandees from victories in the Punic wars over Carthage, and the subsequent shuffling around of these lands among their descendants over centuries of inheritance and marriage settlements. Each imperial reign had seen the rise of some 'new men' who married into its existing ranks, but the Senate had, through the centuries, remained the apogee of imperial society, the standard of excellence towards which all Roman wannabees had consistently aimed. The geographical spread of senatorial landed fortunes, even after many centuries, thus continued to reflect Rome's original rise to greatness.

Symmachus and his peers were acutely conscious of the weight of history accumulated by themselves and in their institution, and this too is clearly registered in the letters. In a couple of them Symmachus refers to the Senate of Rome as 'the better part of humankind', *pars melior humani generis*.¹¹ And by this he didn't just mean that he and his peers were richer than anyone else, rather that they were 'better' human beings in a moral sense as well: greater in virtue. In the past, it was much more usual to claim that one had more because one's greater moral worth entitled one to it. Only since the Second World War has the cult of wealth for its own sake become so prevalent that no further justification for privileged ownership seems to be required. The letters give us unique insight into the self-image of personal superiority with which the Romans of Rome justified their wealth. About one quarter of the nine hundred letters are recommendations, introducing younger peers to Symmachus' grander acquaintances. Virtues of one kind or another are bandied about: 'integrity

‘rectitude’, ‘honesty’ and ‘purity of manners’ all recur at regular intervals. This is no random collection of attributes: for Symmachus and his peers, their possession was explicitly linked to a particular type of education.

The bedrock of the system was the intense study of a small number of literary texts under the guidance of an expert in language and literary interpretation, the grammarian. This occupied the individual for seven or more years from about the age of eight, and concentrated on just four authors: Vergil, Cicero, Sallust and Terence. You then graduated to a rhetor, with whom a wider range of texts was studied, but the methods employed were broadly the same. Texts were read line by line, and every twist of language dutifully identified and discussed. A typical school exercise would consist of having to express some everyday happening in the style of one of the chosen authors (‘Chariot race as might be told by Vergil: Go’). Essentially, these texts were held to contain within them a canon of ‘correct’ language, and children were to learn that language – both the particular vocabulary and the complex grammar within which to employ it. One thing this did was to hold educated Latin in a kind of cultural vice, preventing or at least significantly slowing down the normal processes of linguistic change. It also had the effect of allowing instant identification. As soon as a member of the Roman elite opened his mouth, it was obvious that he had learned ‘correct’ Latin. It is as though a modern education system concentrated on the works of Shakespeare with the object of distinguishing the educated by their ability to speak Shakespearean English to one another. To indicate how different, by the fourth century, elite Latin may have been from popular speech, the graffiti found at Pompeii – buried in the eruption of AD 79 – suggest that in everyday usage Latin was already evolving into less grammatically structured Romance.

But talking the talk was only part of the story. Aside from the language of these texts, Symmachus and his friends also claimed that absorbing their contents made them human beings of a calibre quite unmatched by anyone else. Latin grammar, they argued, was a tool for developing a logical, precise mind. If you didn’t have a mastery of moods and tenses, you couldn’t say precisely what you meant, or accurately express the exact relationship between things.¹² Grammar, in other words, was an introduction to formal logic. They also saw their literary texts as a kind of accumulated moral database of human behaviour – both good and bad – from which, with guidance, one could learn what to do and what not to do. On a simple level, from the fate of Alexander the Great you could learn not to get drunk at dinner and throw spears at your best friend. But there were also more subtle lessons to be learned, about pride, endurance, love and so forth, and their consequences: all exemplified by particular individuals’ actions and fates. Still more profoundly – and here they were echoing an educational philosophy developed originally in classical Greece – Symmachus and his peers argued that it was only by pondering on a wide recorded range of men behaving well and badly that it was possible to develop a full intellectual and emotional range in oneself, to bring one to the highest state achievable. True pity, true love, true hate and true admiration were not things that occurred naturally in uneducated humans; enlightenment and true humanity had to be refined in the forge of the Latin schoolroom. As Symmachus put it in the case of one Palladius: ‘[His] eloquence moved his Latin audience by the skill with which the speech was organized, the richness of his imagination, the weight of his thoughts, the brilliance of his style. I will give you my own opinion: the gifts of his oratory are as exemplary as his character.’¹³ Not only did educated Romans speak a superior language, but, in the view of Symmachus and his fellows, they had things to discuss in that language which were inaccessible to the uneducated.

To the modern eye, much of this is very unappealing. Although the grammarian did also use his texts to raise historical, geographical, scientific and other matters, as appropriate, the curriculum was extraordinarily narrow. The focus on language also had the effect of turning written Latin into a profoundly formal medium. In his letters, Symmachus tends to address everyone – as Queen Victoria complained of Gladstone – like a public meeting: ‘So that no one should accuse me of the crime of interrupting our correspondence, I would rather hurry to fulfil my duties than to await, in long inaction, your reply.’¹⁴ This is the opening of the first letter of the collection, written to his father in 375. Such formality between father and son wasn’t seen as untoward in the fourth century. Indeed, as far as the ancients were concerned, the fruits of this precious education were held to manifest themselves first and foremost in the art of skilled public speaking. Symmachus was known in his own time, and wished to be known, as ‘the Orator’, and had the habit of sending his friends copies of his speeches.¹⁵

Not all late Romans were quite so focused on education and its importance as Symmachus, but all agreed that it not only equipped the individual to identify virtue for himself, but gave him the necessary tools to persuade others of his (correct) opinion. In other words, what it did was to equip its beneficiaries to lead the rest of mankind.

As might be expected, various responsibilities were held to follow from possession of this hugely coveted advantage. Having been prepared for leadership, one had to lead. This could take the form of helping to frame just laws, of holding high office with exemplary rectitude, or, less formally, of simply setting a public example of proper behaviour. Ancient Roman society held that you should not attempt to control others until you could control yourself. The educated also owed a duty of service to the literary tradition in which they had been taught. Study of the ancient texts, sometimes manifesting itself in new editions and commentaries, was a lifelong duty, and one which Symmachus and his friends were happy to continue. The letters mention his own work on Pliny’s *Natural History* and one of his closest friends, Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, was an expert on the philosophy of Aristotle. The manuscript traditions of most classical texts preserve the marginal comments of different Roman grandees copied out again and again over the centuries by medieval scribes.¹⁶

Perhaps most important of all, a member of the educated elite was obliged to maintain good relations with his peers. In many ways, Symmachus’ letters are highly frustrating. He lived in interesting times, knew everyone who was anyone, and wrote to most of them. But his letters comment on current affairs extremely rarely. As a result, exasperated historians have often dismissed them as ‘never has any man written so much to say so little’.¹⁷ In fact Symmachus did have opinions, and strong ones, but that isn’t really the issue. The main historical importance of the letters lies in the collective mass, and in what they tell us about late Roman elite values, not in what they do or don’t say about specific events. Their message is that the Roman elite share a distinct and privileged culture and need to stick together through thick and thin. They communicate the idea that both sender and recipient belong to the club – that both, in Margaret Thatcher’s inimitable phrase, are ‘one of us’. There was a well defined etiquette. A first letter to someone was like making a first visit in person, and failure to write without reasonable excuse might arouse suspicion or dislike. Acceptable excuses for silence, once communication had been established, included personal or familial illness, and the burden of office. Rather strangely, a person leaving Rome had to write first; only then could he expect a correspondent reply. Once established, a relationship could serve many different purposes – as Symmachus’ 200-odd letters of recommendation attest – but the most important thing was the

relationship itself.¹⁸

Much of this world and its cultural assumptions would have been familiar to Julius Caesar. It was through contact with Greece, where intellectuals had been spinning sophisticated social and political theories from the middle of the first millennium BC, that most of Symmachus' educational ideology entered Roman culture. Much of it had already done so by the time of Caesar. Caesar was himself a man of letters and of oratory, living in a society where such skills were highly valued. Cicero, the greatest of all Latin orators and one of the canonical gang of four studied by Symmachus and his friends with such enthusiasm in the fourth century, was Caesar's contemporary. As one might expect after four hundred years of further study of a limited body of material, the rules of composition in the different genres of Latin literature had become more complicated than in Caesar's day, but the basic idea was the same. Equally familiar to both eras would have been the vision of an elite marked out by an exclusive education and by the destiny to lead humankind.¹⁹

Caesar would also have recognized, more or less, the thronging non-elite who still made up most of the population of Rome in the fourth century. They figure only in asides in Symmachus' letters, but we glimpse the same basic need for *panem et circenses* – bread and circuses – to keep them happy and prevent social unrest. When, on one occasion, food failed to arrive from North Africa in Symmachus' time, the non-landowning plebeians turned nasty, as they had once done in his father's day – and with good reason – when there was a wine shortage. The Romans had a recipe for underwater concrete which involved wine, and the elder Symmachus was overseeing some building work using this mixture when the commons got wind of it. Using wine to make concrete when *they* were running short was certainly a rioting matter.²⁰ Symmachus *père* was forced to leave the city.

A concern to keep the people happy also shows in the younger Symmachus' elaborate preparations for the games that his son had to give to mark his own ascent into the senatorial order. Caesar had given such games himself centuries before. Amongst other attractions, Symmachus obtained seven Scottish hunting dogs – presumably wolfhounds of some kind – and, from contacts on the frontier, twenty slaves, five each to be given to the four chariot-racing factions of the Hippodrome. The whole thing was a huge theatrical production, but it reads from the letters like a chapter full of accidents, even if some were only minor irritations. A rather peeved Symmachus complains in one letter about having to pay customs duty on bears he was importing from North Africa.²¹ More annoyingly, a troop of actors and circus professionals hired from Sicily got 'lost' on the beaches of the bay of Naples, where they were presumably doing a little impromptu moonlighting, before Symmachus' agent managed to track them down and bundle them on to Rome.²² Spanish horses had gone down particularly well in his own consular games a decade earlier, so Symmachus badgered an Iberian contact into procuring some for his son. Unfortunately, only eleven out of the sixteen survived the journey, which ruined the plan. (You needed four sets of four – one for each faction – for chariot racing.²³) Our last glimpse of Symmachus the circus master is a fairly desperate one. There had been delays, the letters tell us, and since the only surviving crocodiles were refusing to eat, he was anxiously urging that the games be staged before the poor animals expired from starvation.²⁴ Still, the reality behind all good theatre is total chaos, and this must certainly have been so in Caesar's time.

Restricting our gaze to the city of Rome, the extent of the Empire's transformation between the eras of Caesar and Symmachus is not immediately apparent. Rome was still, in the fourth century, a bloated imperial power-base, its population and grandeur swollen by the revenues of Empire. Still dominated, likewise, by a self-regarding and determinedly blue-blooded elite, confidently assertive

its superiority, it cast only the occasional glance over its shoulder at the urban masses. But, however grand, Rome was only one corner of the Empire, and, even in its continuing grandeur, absence of change was more apparent than real.

The Imperial Crown

IN EARLY WINTER 368/9, Symmachus left Rome and headed north. This was no sightseeing tour. He was leading a senatorial embassy north of the Alps, to the city of Trier in the Moselle valley (where Germany now borders France and Luxembourg) – the old stampingground of Indutiomarus, the leader of the Treveri, who had pushed the Eburones into attacking Sabinus and Cotta some 421 years before. Typically, none of Symmachus' letters gives any details of the trip, either its route or its circumstances. As an official senatorial mission, however, its members were entitled to use the *cursus publicus*, the officially maintained network of stopping-points where changes of horses could be had and/or lodging for the night. The main road north led through the Alps over the St Bernard Pass to the headwaters of the Rhône, then on beside the River Saône to the headwaters of the Moselle and down the river to the city of Trier. Had Caesar's deified ghost journeyed with these ambassadors, any comforting sense of familiarity that the city of Rome might still have generated would quickly have disappeared as it surveyed the magnitude of the transformation wrought in these territories during the intervening four centuries.

One profound if obvious change was encompassed in the object of the mission. Symmachus and his friends were bringing crown gold (*aurum coronarium*) to the reigning emperor, Valentinian. Crown gold was a theoretically voluntary cash payment, which the cities of the Empire handed over to emperors on their accession and on every fifth anniversary (*quinquennalia*) subsequently. Valentinian had been elevated to the purple in 364, so Symmachus' embassy marked his fifth year in power. It was a touch early, but the ambassadors were giving themselves plenty of time to get to Valentinian by 2 February, the actual anniversary. In Caesar's day, of course, there had been no emperor at the head of the Roman Empire, but a series of quarrelling oligarchs whose rivalries and contentions generated civil wars aplenty. In 45 BC Caesar had been made *imperator* (commander of the army) for life and was offered the crown a year later, just before his murder. Nonetheless, the imperial title was a novelty when it was claimed and defined by Caesar's nephew Octavian under the name Augustus. Since then the office had been transformed out of all recognition.

For one thing, all pretence of republicanism had vanished. Augustus had worked hard at pretending that the power structures he had created around himself did not represent the overthrow of the old Republic, and that, in a mixed constitution, the Senate continued to have important functions. But even in his lifetime the veneer had looked pretty thin, and by the fourth century no one thought of the emperor as anything other than an autocratic monarch. Hellenistic concepts of rulership developed across the successor kingdoms which emerged from Alexander the Great's short-lived Empire, had transformed the ideologies and ceremonial life that defined the imperial image. The ideologies argued that legitimate rulers were divinely inspired and divinely chosen. The first among equals became a sacred ruler, communing with the Divinity, and ordinary human beings had to approach with due deference. By the fourth century, standard protocols included *proskynesis* – throwing yourself down on the ground when introduced into the sacred imperial presence – and, for the privileged few, being allowed to kiss the hem of the emperor's robe. And emperors, of course, were expected to play their part in the drama. One memorable ceremonial moment described by the fourth-century historian Ammianus Marcellinus is the entry of the Emperor Constantius II into Rome in 357.

Although Ammianus did not altogether approve of Constantius, he did think him the ideal ceremonial emperor: ‘As if his neck were in a vice, he kept the gaze of his eyes straight ahead, and turned his face neither to the right nor left, nor . . . did he nod when the wheel jolted, nor was he ever seen to spit, to wipe or rub his face or nose, or move his hands about.’ Thus, when the occasion demanded it – and on the big days, as was only fitting in a divinely chosen ruler – Constantius could behave in superhuman fashion, showing no signs whatsoever of normal human frailty.²⁵

Nor did fourth-century emperors merely look more powerful than their first-century counterparts. From Augustus onwards, emperors had enjoyed enormous authority, but the job description widened still further over the centuries. Take, for instance, law-making. Up to the middle of the third century the Roman legal system developed via a variety of channels. The Senate could make laws, and so could the emperor. However, the group primarily responsible for legal innovation had been specialist academic lawyers called ‘jurisconsults’. These were licensed by the emperor to deal with questions of interpretation, and with new issues to which they applied established legal principles. From the first to the mid-third century Roman law had developed primarily on the back of their learned opinions. By the fourth, though, the jurisconsults had been eclipsed by the emperor; doubtful legal matters were now referred to him. As a result, the emperor completely dominated the process of law-making. A similar story could be told in a number of other areas, not least in the fiscal structure, where by the fourth century the emperor’s officials played a much more direct role in the taxing of the Empire than they had in the first. Emperors had always had the potential authority to expand their range of function. By the fourth century much of that potential had become reality, in both ceremonial presentation and function.²⁶

Equally fundamental, it was now well-established custom for the office to be divided – for more than one emperor to rule at the same time. In the fourth century, this never quite formalized into a system of distinct eastern and western halves of Empire, each with its own ruler, and there were times when one man did try to rule the entire Empire on his own. The emperor Constantius II (337–61) ruled alone for part of his reign, his immediate successors Julian and Jovian did so again during 361–4, and Theodosius I once more in the early 390s. But none of these experiments in sole rule lasted very long, and for most of the fourth century the job of governing the Empire was split. Power-sharing was organized in a variety of ways. Some emperors used younger relations – sons if they had them, nephews if they didn’t – as junior but nonetheless imperial colleagues with their own courts. Constantine I utilized this model from the 310s down to his death in 337, Constantius II did the same with his nephews Gallus and Julian for most of the 350s, and Theodosius I was moving towards it with his two sons in the 390s. They had been promoted to the rank of Augustus, but were too young at the time of their father’s death to exercise real authority. Other emperors shared sovereignty on an equal basis with other relatives, usually brothers. The sons of Constantine I operated in this fashion from 337 to 351, as did Valentinian I and Valens for a decade after 364. In addition, at the end of the third and start of the fourth centuries, there had been a long period when power was shared on a broad equal basis by non-relatives. The emperor Diocletian established the so-called Tetrarchy (‘rule of four’) in the 290s, sharing power, as Augustus, with one other fellow Augustus and two Caesars,²⁷ all four having defined geographical zones of operation. Different individuals came and went, but the tetrarchic model continued to operate in some sense down to the early 320s. The late Empire thus saw many different models of power-sharing, but for much of the fourth century there were two emperors, one usually based in the west and the other in the east, and by the fifth this had crystallized more or less into a formal system.

Not only was there now an emperor, and usually more than one, but a further key transformation is implicit in the fact that Symmachus' embassy had to travel north to find Valentinian on such a momentous occasion as the fifth anniversary of his accession. There is a somewhat bemusing scholarly argument in the field of late Roman studies about whether a reigning emperor visited Rome on five occasions in the fourth century (for perhaps up to a month at a time), or just four.²⁸ This is a startling *kind* of argument. Whether it was four or five times doesn't actually matter: the point is that by the fourth century, emperors hardly visited Rome at all. While the city remained the Empire's symbolic capital, and still received a disproportionate percentage of imperial revenues in the form of free food and other subsidies, it was no longer a political or administrative centre of importance. Especially in the later third and earlier fourth centuries, new centres of power had developed much closer to the main imperial frontiers. Within Italy, Milan, several days' journey north of Rome, had emerged as the main seat of active imperial government. Elsewhere, at different times, Trier on the Moselle, Sirmium by the confluence of the Save and the Danube, Nicomedia in Asia Minor, and Antioch close to the Persian front, had all become important, particularly under Diocletian's Tetrarchy when the four active emperors had had separate geographical spheres. In the fourth century, things stabilized a little: Milan and Trier in the west, together with Antioch and a new capital, Constantinople, in the east, emerged as the dominant administrative and political centres of the Empire.

In a speech to Valentinian's brother Valens in 364, the philosopher and orator Themistius implies, to devastating effect, a comparison between Constantinople and Rome that highlights the latter's drawbacks as an imperial capital:

Constantinople links the two continents [Europe and Asia], is an anchorage for maritime needs, a market for trade by land and sea, an effective adornment of Roman rule. For it has not been built like some sacred precinct, far from the highway nor does it keep the emperors from attending to public affairs if they are engaged in business there, but is a place through which all must pass who arrive from and set out in all directions, so that whenever it keeps them closest to home, it puts them at the very centre of the whole empire.²⁹

'A sacred precinct' – full of temples to the gods who had presided over the ancient victories – 'far from the highway' more or less sums up fourth-century Rome. As Themistius identified so accurately, one reason for emperors abandoning their original home was administrative necessity. The pressing external threats that commanded their attention were to be found east of the River Rhine, north of the River Danube, and on the Persian front between the Tigris and the Euphrates. This meant that the strategic axis of the Empire ran on a rough diagonal from the North Sea along the Rhine and Danube as far as the Iron Gates where the Danube is crossed by the Carpathian Mountains, then overlapped across the Balkans and Asia Minor to the city of Antioch, from which point the eastern front could be supervised. All the fourth-century capitals were situated on or close to this line of power (map 1). Rome was just too far away from it to function effectively; information flowed in too slowly, and commands sent out took too long to take effect.³⁰

But administrative necessity alone does not get to the crux of how it was that Rome could now be so thoroughly ignored. The same kind of logistic and strategic necessity had drawn Julius Caesar north of the Alps, west into Spain, or out into the eastern Mediterranean every summer, but he nevertheless returned to Italy most winters to secure his political position, handing out presents to his friends and intimidating his opponents. He had to do this because, in his time, the Senate of Rome had provided

the one and only participatory audience for the political power struggles that consumed both his energies and those of his fellow oligarchs (when they weren't too busy conquering other bits of the Mediterranean). All of Caesar's important political supporters and opponents were members of the Senate, most senior legionary officers and certainly the commanders were of senatorial standing, and it was in front of the Senate that the big power contests were played out. It was on the steps of the Senate too, symbolically, on the Ides of March in 44 BC that Caesar was assassinated. Fourth-century emperors, by contrast, didn't need to spend time in Rome because, in addition to the administrative pressures that drew them out of Italy, they were also playing to a different political audience. Emperors didn't go to Rome very much in the fourth century because, for political reasons, they needed to operate elsewhere. The starting-point for understanding this critical development in the evolution of the Empire is the fact that the imperial court – wherever it might be – was the distribution centre for everything that aspirational Romans desired. Wealth, dignities, favours, promotions: all flowed from the imperial presence, the point at which the tax revenues of western Eurasia were redistributed.

Contemporaries were well aware of this. In 310 a speaker before the emperor Constantine put it succinctly: 'For in whatever places your divinity distinguishes most frequently with his visits everything is increased – men, walls and favours; nor more abundantly did the earth send forth flowers for Jupiter and Juno to lie on than do cities and temples spring up in your footsteps.'³¹ In Caesar's time, all of this wealth had been redistributed within the confines of the city of Rome in order to win friends and influence people in that crucial arena. But to follow such a strategy in the fourth century would have been political suicide. Four hundred years on from the Ides of March, patronage had to be distributed much more widely.

Rather than in the Roman Senate, the critical political audience of the fourth-century Empire was to be found in two other quarters. One of these was a long-standing player of the game of imperial politics: the army, or, rather, its officer corps. It is traditional to talk of 'the Roman army' as a political player, but in normal circumstances the rank and file didn't have opinions of their own, and wherever we have more detailed narrative accounts it is always groups of senior officers that are involved in deciding who should succeed to the purple or organizing coups. The fact that the battle order of the army had changed since the time of Julius Caesar naturally affected which of its officers played a leading political role. In Caesar's time, the army came in the form of legions of over 5,000 men, each in itself a major military formation. Individual legionary commanders – legates (who were also usually of senatorial background) – thus tended to be significant in their own right. By the fourth century, the key figures in the military hierarchy were the senior general officers and staffs of mobile regional field armies, called *comitatenses*. Broadly speaking, there was always one important mobile force covering each of the three key frontiers: one in the west (grouped on the Rhine frontier and often – in northern Italy as well), another in the Balkans covering the Danube, and a third in northern Mesopotamia covering the east.³²

The other key political force in the late Empire was the imperial bureaucracy (often called *palatini*: from *palatium*, Latin for 'palace'). Although bureaucrats did not possess the military clout available to a senior general, they controlled both finance and the processes of law-making and enforcement, and no imperial regime could function without their active participation. There always had been bureaucratic functionaries around the emperor, and they had always been powerful. In the early Empire, the emperor's freedmen were particularly feared. What was new in the late Empire was

the size of the central bureaucratic machine. As late as AD 249 there were still only 250 senior bureaucratic functionaries in the entire Empire. By the year 400, just 150 years later, there were 6,000. Most operated at the major imperial headquarters from which the key frontiers were supervised: not Rome, therefore, but, depending on the emperor, at Trier and/or Milan for the Rhine, Sirmium or increasingly Constantinople for the Danube, and Antioch for the east. It was no longer the Senate at Rome, but the comitatensian commanders, concentrated on key frontiers, and the senior bureaucrats gathered in the capitals from which these frontiers were administered, who settled the political fate of the Empire.³³

The imperial throne was generally passed on by dynastic succession, but only if there was a suitable candidate who could command a reasonable degree of consensus among the generals and bureaucrats. The emperor Jovian, for example, left an infant son on his death in 364, who was passed over, and in 378 the unrelated Theodosius I was elevated to the purple because, although two sons of Valentinian I had already been made emperor, the second, Valentinian II, was still too young to rule effectively in the east. There were also times of dynastic discontinuity. In 363/4 the Constantinian dynasty ran out of appointable heirs, prompting a cabal of senior generals and bureaucrats to discuss a range of possible candidates. In practice, army officers tended to get the nod at such moments (first Jovian in 363 and then, after his early death, Valentinian in 364), but the higher bureaucracy was involved in the process, and it was not impossible for its members to contemplate bidding for power. On the promotion of Jovian in 363, a bureaucrat of the same name was lobbed down a well because he posed a potential threat, and in 371 a senior pen-pusher by the name of Theodorus was executed for plotting against Valentinian's brother Valens. This plot involved a seance where Theodorus and his friends asked for the name of the next emperor. The ouija board spelled out Th-e-o-d – at which point they stopped to open a bottle of Falernian, one of the most expensive wines of antiquity. If they'd only carried on, they could have saved themselves both false hopes and nasty deaths, since Valens's successor was called Theodosius.³⁴

A potent combination of logistics and politics had thus worked a fundamental change in the geography of power. Because of this, armies, emperors and bureaucrats had all emigrated out of Italy. This process also explains why, more than ever before, more than one emperor was needed. Administratively, Antioch or Constantinople was too far from the Rhine, and Trier or Milan too far from the east, for one emperor to exercise effective control over all three key frontiers. Politically, too, one centre of patronage distribution was not sufficient to keep all the senior army officers and bureaucrats happy enough to prevent usurpations. Each of the three major army groups required a fair share of the spoils, paid to them in gold in relatively small annual amounts, and much larger ones on major imperial anniversaries (such as the *quinquennialia* which brought Symmachus northwards). Their officers also liked all the promotions and distinctions – not to mention invitations to dinner which flowed from the imperial presence. The same was true on the civilian side. No regime could afford to concentrate all its patronage in just one capital, or too many bigwigs would be left out of the loop. In the fourth century this political necessity was generally appreciated, and where an emperor did try to rule alone for any extended period there was usually trouble. Late in the century, Theodosius I was based in Constantinople, and for his own dynastic reasons (he wanted his two sons eventually to inherit half of the Empire) refused to appoint a recognized counterpart in the west. As a result, he was faced with rumbling discontent there, as well as dangerous usurpers, who found plentiful support among the bureaucrats and military officers who felt they were not getting a fair share of the imperial cake.

THIS ECLIPSE OF Rome's importance in both politics and administration was no sudden development. As far back as the first and second centuries AD emperors had become increasingly peripatetic, already sometimes operating with an imperial colleague to help them deal with problems as they arose. Between 161 and 169, Lucius Verus was co-Augustus alongside Marcus Aurelius. By the fourth century, the glory days of the Republic, when it was home to every faction and conspiracy of importance and when the Senate's resolutions played a major role in the running of the state, had gone for ever. The Senate's role within the Empire was now essentially ceremonial, its actions and members playing only a marginal role in the acquisition and exercise of power. Individual senators remained rich and might have significant political careers.³⁶ But even here, there was an important limitation. The late Roman senatorial career ladder – the *cursus honorum* – was an entirely civilian one, involving no military commands. This militated against a senator taking the ultimate step towards imperial power, which tended, as we have seen, to be the preserve of generals. Senatorial minutes were forwarded to the emperor for his perusal (of course he read them . . .), imperial despatches kept the Senate informed about important matters (it was a mark of honour, and one sometimes enjoyed by Symmachus, to be picked to read them out) and the Senate could make representations by embassy to the emperor on matters of particular significance to its own members. But it was not much involved in active policy making, and little courting of its opinion took place except when it came to deciding the size of its annual 'voluntary' contribution to the imperial finances. The Senate was full of wealthy men who paid a useful amount of tax and might enjoy important careers, but it was no longer – as a body – a major player in struggles over power and policy.

Not surprisingly, therefore, membership was gradually downgraded. Before the fourth century the senators of Rome (titled *clarissimi*, 'most distinguished') enjoyed a unique status. They were immune from obligations to serve on other city councils, and enjoyed various financial and legal privileges. In the course of the fourth century, a number of developments altered this situation. First emperors slowly but surely advanced large numbers of their new bureaucrats up the social scale towards senatorial status. Initially, this happened piecemeal, but in AD 367 the emperor Valentinian introduced a major reform of the honours system which aligned and combined all the possible marks of social status that could be acquired in both the civilian and military branches of imperial service into one system, where *clarissimus* became everyone's aim. From then until the end of the century there was a marked inflation which saw huge numbers of bureaucratic jobs acquire the *clarissimus* grade. The 6,000 top imperial functionaries of AD 400 were all occupying jobs that involved senatorial status either in post or upon retirement. The traditional senatorial families of Rome thus ceased to occupy their unique social niche. Even worse, the large numbers of new *clarissimi* made it necessary for emperors (in order still to have something to bestow) to subdivide the senatorial class and create two higher grades – *spectabiles* and *illustres* – which by and large could only be obtained by active bureaucratic service rather than by birth. At broadly the same time, between the 330s and the end of the century, a succession of emperors passed measures that created a second and equal imperial Senate in the new capital of the east, largely by promoting new men but also by transferring some old Roman senators already resident in the east.

Between AD 250 and 400, then, the blue-blooded senators of Rome saw their cherished position eaten away by the emergence of a vast senatorial class, as well as the slow but steady rise of a sister body in Constantinople.³⁷

All these developments created a political world that Julius Caesar would not have recognized. The first among equals had become a divinely appointed ruler of what some historians have christened the 'inside out' Empire from the geography of its active capitals, generally operating with at least one colleague of equal status and exercising wide-ranging authority over every aspect of life. The imperial bureaucracy had emerged as the new Roman aristocracy, replacing the demilitarized and marginalized Senate of Rome. These developments also explain, of course, why, when they went bearing gold in search of the emperor Valentinian, Symmachus and his embassy had to make the trek to Trier. Between them, these transformations raise another, still more fundamental issue. The Roman world of Caesar's day had been physically just as large, but there had been no need for two emperors or for such a wide distribution of patronage to prevent usurpation and revolt. What, then, had changed between 50 BC and AD 369? To find the answer to this question, we must take a closer look at the destination of Symmachus' embassy: the city of Trier, command centre for the Rhine frontier.

Rome Is Where the Heart Is

ROMAN TRIER started out as a small military installation, set on a strategic ford across the River Moselle in the old heartlands of the hostile Treveri. The city that greeted Symmachus and his fellow ambassadors in winter 368/9, however, was no military camp, but the populous and prosperous bastion of *Romanitas* – 'Romanness' – of the Rhine frontier region. If the ambassadors had approached the city from the west, they would have entered by the Porta Nigra – the Black Gates – the finest example of a Roman city gateway still standing in any part of the former Empire. Surrounded by modest buildings, it still impresses. In the fourth century, its impact was much stronger. You were first faced with a massive iron portcullis; if admitted, you were led into a courtyard, then through to the gateway proper. On either side were four-storey arcaded towers, bristling with guards ready to pour down missiles on any hostile force trapped between the portcullis and the gate. This particular gateway owed its survival to a tenth-century Holy Man who made it his cell. Hence it eventually became a church, whereas the rest of the Roman city walls and gates have long since been quarried for building stone. On Symmachus' day, the gate punctuated a 6-kilometre wall, 3 metres thick and 6 high, which enclosed a city area of 285 hectares. Another massive gateway dominated the bridge over the Moselle, which has long since replaced the original ford and is pictured in a fourth-century gold medallion struck at Trier.

Inside, the city was no less impressive. In the early fourth century, the whole north-east quarter was rebuilt as the functional and ceremonial centre of imperial rule in the region. From the 310s, the work was carried forward by different members of the Constantinian dynasty, then, after the death of its last representative, continued by their non-dynastic successors. Palace, cathedral and circus together with a set of perhaps private imperial baths – the 'Kaiserthermen' – now dominated this part of the city. Many late Roman imperial ceremonies were orchestrated in the circus, and underground passages led from the palace to the imperial box there. The ground-plan of the cathedral, which literary sources indicate, was complete by the late 360s, was recovered in excavations after the Second World War. Above ground, you can still see remains of the bath complex and, more or less intact, the basilica – the emperors' great audience chamber. Like the Porta Nigra, this also survived into the medieval period by dint of becoming a church and now stands stark and isolated in the middle of a one-way traffic system.³⁸

Back in the fourth century, the basilica was flanked by porticoes and the more private areas of the palace, but would still have stood out as impressive: 67 metres long, 27.5 wide and 30 from floor to ceiling, it could virtually hold the Porta Nigra twice. The basilica is of particular interest to us because

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