

# War in Ancient Rome

**Explain why war was so fundamental to social and political organisation in *Ancient Rome*.**

**Was it ideology or necessity that drove the ancient worlds to war?**

It is difficult to study the social and political organisation of Ancient Rome as a single cohesive entity, as Ancient Rome was a phenomenon that spanned hundreds of years and passed through several different political systems. Despite this, the role of war in Roman society, both in Republic and Imperial times, was relatively consistent. Although some historians argue that Rome fought in self-defence, all the evidence suggests less altruistic intentions. Territorial expansion and economic gain were key drives. Yet more important than these was Roman ideology. War was vital to Roman identity; both in the conceptualising of themselves and the imagining of an 'other'. The creation of a military state was born out of these drives, but the state itself encouraged these factors in a self-perpetuating cycle.

A lack of objective primary sources leaves many historians in conflict over the degree of necessity of Rome's many wars. Brian Campbell argues that 'the Romans were not addicted to warfare and did not seek to sustain their empire by persistent conquering or continual expansion.'<sup>1</sup> This is a difficult position to defend, not in the least because Rome did persistently conquer and expand. Williamson Murray explains that the 'borders of Roman rule

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Campbell, "The Origins of War," in *War and Society in Imperial Rome 31BC-284AD*, (London: Routledge, 2002) p.18.

claimed little geographic coherence' and made little strategic sense. Yet he still argues that Rome has a 'cohesive grand strategy' which focused both on expanding and preserving the empire.<sup>2</sup> These plans are so general that they could be equated to a general ideology more than a military strategy. A perception of Rome's determination to be at war is supported by the use of outrageous ultimatums as terms of peace. These would have been expected to be refused; historians know of only one of these being accepted.<sup>3</sup> Polybius explains that Rome made a conscious effort to 'always to seem to be acting in self-defence and to enter upon wars out of necessity,' but this could hardly be construed as genuine attempts at peace.<sup>4</sup>

The economy of Ancient Rome was implicitly tied up with war and imperial expansion. Grand Roman cities were built as a product of wealth drawn 'from the periphery to the centre.'<sup>5</sup> Vast sums of money were poured into building extravagant public buildings that reflected the 'glory' of the empire. The Baths of Caracalla, for example, are believed to have cost the equivalent of a year's subsistence for half a million people.<sup>6</sup> Huge taxable populations, acquired through expansion and the creation of subjects, facilitated these projects. This economic power translated to military power. This was recognised by the Romans themselves who banned trade with 'barbarians' except at a few specified locations, with additional regulations, as a means of inhibiting 'barbarian' access to arms and supplies.<sup>7</sup> Economic gain

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<sup>2</sup> Williamson Murray, "Rome's Big Ideas," *Military History* 27 (2010): p.64.

<sup>3</sup> William V. Harris, "Imperialism and Self-Defence," in *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome, 327-70 BC*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p.167-8.

<sup>4</sup> Peter S. Derow, "Polybius, Rome, and the East," *Journal of Roman Studies* 69 (1979): p.15

<sup>5</sup> Willem M. Jongman, "Rome: The Political Economy of a World- Empire," *The Medieval History Journal* 6 (2003): p.326.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.323.

<sup>7</sup> E. A. Thompson, "Introduction: Economic warfare," in *Romans and Barbarians: The Decline of the Western Empire*, (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), p.10.

was not just an end in itself, but successful war called for more war, with about half of Rome's taxes being spent on the military directly.<sup>8</sup>

It is evident that Rome's material aims for war were not self-defence, but rather territorial and economic gain. Yet the importance of the military in Ancient Rome goes beyond material concerns. Warfare was a vital component in Romans' imagining of themselves. The base Roman values of *honor* (honour) and *dignitas* (dignity) that Cicero speaks of, were directly related to military endeavour.<sup>9</sup> Rome saw itself as divinely ordained people of 'eternal victory'. Florus reflects that in histories of Rome 'their exploits seemed like the history not of a single people but of the human race.'<sup>10</sup> It is not surprising that they also thought themselves to be descended from Mars, the god of war.<sup>11</sup> The importance of this cannot be dismissed as belonging solely within the realm of religion. *Felicitas* (divine favour and good fortune) was an 'essential qualification for leadership' and very much expected to be visible through military victory.<sup>12</sup> Emperors, regardless of whether they were ever physically present on a battlefield, were forever symbolically envisioned as 'war-like' figures with military dress and titles.<sup>13</sup> The religious and the military merged in the concept of triumphal parades which facilitated the display of the spoils of war.<sup>14</sup> Warfare can be viewed as a Roman ideological necessity particularly in light of the fact that peace was seen to be dependent on war.

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<sup>8</sup> Jongman, "Rome: The Political Economy of a World- Empire," p.325.

<sup>9</sup> Harris, "Imperialism and Self-Defence," p. 165.

<sup>10</sup> Campbell, "The Origins of War," p.12.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.13.

<sup>12</sup> Michael McCormick, "Invincible Empire: The Ideology of Victory under the Principate," in *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium and the Early Medieval West*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.12.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.21.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.15.

Constantine was hailed as a 'restorer of Roman security and liberty' through his violent actions.<sup>15</sup>

As well as being a key definition of self, war shaped a 'barbarian other'. The vivid idea of the 'barbarian' is reflected in an anonymous late fourth century writer 'wild nations are pressing upon the Roman Empire and howling round about it everywhere.'<sup>16</sup> The 'barbarian' simply comprised of any force that was not under the control of 'civilised' Rome. In whatever way Romans wished to imagine themselves, the 'barbarian' was the opposite and as such irrational, governed by emotions and out of control.<sup>17</sup> Ralph Mathisen explains how extensive Roman propaganda illustrated 'violent acts barbarians performed, and, paradoxically, the violence necessary to keep them from being violent.'<sup>18</sup> Yet upon being conquered 'savage barbarians could become contributing members of Roman society' with the idea that they would be civilised by the force of Roman rationality.<sup>19</sup> As such the process of war was both important for defence from barbarianism, and reform of barbarians.

These ideological processes caused Rome to go to war, not just on individual occasions but in a self-perpetuating cycle. The celebration of military victory as the ultimate sign of the success of an emperor, empowered the emperor to go to war whenever he pleased without any real

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<sup>15</sup> Campbell, "The Origins of War," p.16.

<sup>16</sup> Ralph W. Mathisen, "Violent Behaviour and the Construction of the Barbarian Identity in Late Antiquity," in *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices*, ed. by Harold Allen Drake. (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006) p.27.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.30.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.27.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.33.

obligation to consult others.<sup>20</sup> This same power, also placed pressure on emperors to live up to this 'warlike' image.<sup>21</sup> From Augustus onwards, the permanent presence of an army itself could encourage an occupation to be found for them. As well as this, the taxes received by dominated provinces funded further conflict. William Harris highlights the routine nature of war when he argues that 'a war against some enemy or other, with some 'justification' or other, the Romans expected and intended almost every year.'<sup>22</sup>

As such it can be seen that extensive and persistent warfare was fundamental to Ancient Roman society. Degrees of necessity for conflict were essentially irrelevant. War brought material gains such as territorial expansion and economic wealth which Rome sought. However beyond this, military victory was vital to Roman identity and the understanding of their place in the world.

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<sup>20</sup> Campbell, "The Origins of War," p.5.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.12.

<sup>22</sup> Harris, "Imperialism and Self-Defence," p.254.

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