CHAPTER TWO

THE ROMAN’S BURDEN

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As Gibbon once famously remarked, the surprising thing about the Roman Empire is not its fall, but rather its remarkable longevity.¹ This very durability may well have led to the comparative silence that we find in our contemporary sources concerning the nature and intentions of Roman Imperialism as those living under the Empire in the main simply took Roman rule for granted: it was assumed to be an unchanging and unchangeable constant of their lives and as such no more worthy of comment than the weather.²

This dearth of ancient evidence understandably has in turn led to prolonged debates both about the motivation that led Rome to obtain her Empire and her consequent attitude towards her possessions once they had been obtained. It is perhaps inevitable that, with a lack of Roman material, these discussions have always been heavily influenced by contemporary attitudes to imperialism. This is certainly true of the present where a highly critical, indeed self-flagellating, view of 19th and 20th European Imperialism, known as ‘post-colonialism’ has come to exert a strong influence over thinking about the Roman Empire.³

Whether Rome can be said to have had an ‘Imperial ideology’ or even ‘policy’ is debatable.⁴ This, however, in no way makes the Roman Empire exceptional; many later Empires, notably the British Empire, had no governing ideology per se. Nevertheless, it remains possible to discern underlying dispositions towards imperial possessions and these do provide valuable insights into the way empires were managed by their respective rulers.

¹ Gibbon (1782) ch. 38 pt. 6, ‘The story of its ruin is simple and obvious; and instead of inquiring why the Roman empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long.’ On Pliny and imperialism, see also Lao and Naas in this volume.
² See mutatis mutandis the comments of Gomme (1945) 1–25.
³ A recent example of the post-colonial approach is Mattingley (2006). A more balanced appraisal of the province is perhaps provided by de la Bédoyère (2006). The best response to the post-colonial approach remains Chapman (1979). The debate is not a modern one; it was pursued with vigour in 16th century Spain, see Lupher (2006) ch. 2.
⁴ Millar (1977) provides a salutary, if extreme, warning about the dangers of seeing ‘policy’ at work in the Roman world.
Under the influence of modern ideology, a common position taken towards the Roman empire is that, at best, Rome was indifferent to the nature of her subjects’ lives and that often Roman rule was actively harmful to provincials and knowingly so. Yet much of the evidence used to generate this position is deeply flawed and, perhaps, also in part anachronistic. In constructing this version of imperialism, much stress is placed on the poets of the Augustan age who emphasise the glory of imperial conquest to the exclusion of other factors which may have been present in Rome’s imperial vision. A *locus classicus* of this attitude is the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, where Anchises famously declares that his posterity will have no great claims to the high arts (Verg. *Aen.* 6.847–850):

excudent alii spirantia mollius aera  
(credo equidem), uiuos ducent de marmore uultus,  
orabunt causas melius, caelique meatus  
describent radio et surgentia sidera dicent:

Others, I believe, will mould more softly living bronze, draw living faces from marble, plead cases better, describe the motions of heaven and discuss the rising of the stars

Indeed, Virgil’s deployment of the adverb *mollius* with its potential overtones of excessive effeminacy, when describing the practice of the high arts, may imply that the poet regarded, or thought his readership would regard, such a lack as no bad thing. Instead, Anchises charges Rome to ‘impose the habit of peace’ on the world: that is to say conquer other nations who are ‘proud’ enough to resist Roman rule (Verg. *Aen.* 6.851–853):

tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento  
hae tibi erunt artes, pacisque imponere morem  
parcere subiectis et debellare superbos.

You, Roman, be mindful to rule beneath your sway the peoples of the world: this is your art and to impose the habit of peace, sparing those you have conquered and defeating the arrogant in war.

A similar viewpoint is taken by Horace in his *Odes* and by various other contemporary poets.\(^5\)

But to base arguments on Roman attitudes to empire on such sources is an approach which is laden with problems. First, we must query strongly whether the views of a small coterie of poets accurately reflect the views of

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\(^5\) This material is usefully collated by Brunt (1963).