The Roman Empire in Context

Historical and Comparative Perspectives

Edited by Johann P. Arnason and Kurt A. Raaflaub

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The Roman Empire in Context
The Ancient World: Comparative Histories

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Historical and Comparative Perspectives

Edited by
Johann P. Arnason and Kurt A. Raaflaub
Editors and contributors dedicate this volume to the memory of
S. N. Eisenstadt
(Sept. 10, 1923–Sept. 2, 2010)
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Series Editor’s Preface

The Ancient World: Comparative Histories

The application of a comparative approach to the ancient world at large has been rare. This series, of which the current volume is the fifth, intends to fill this gap. It pursues important social, political, religious, economic, and intellectual issues through a wide range of ancient or early societies, occasionally covering an even broader diachronic scope. “Ancient” will here be understood broadly, encompassing not only societies that are “ancient” within the traditional chronological framework of c.3000 BCE to c.600 CE in East, South, and West Asia, the Mediterranean, and Europe, but also later ones that are structurally “ancient” or “early,” such as those in premodern Japan or in Meso- and South America before the Spanish Conquest. By engaging in comparative studies of the ancient world on a truly global scale, this series hopes to throw light not only on common patterns and marked differences, but also to illustrate the remarkable variety of responses humankind developed to meet common challenges. Focusing as it does on periods that are far removed from our own time, and in which modern identities are less immediately engaged, the series contributes to enhancing our understanding and appreciation of differences among cultures of various traditions and backgrounds. Not least, it thus illuminates the continuing relevance of the study of the ancient world in helping us to cope with problems of our own multicultural world.


The current volume has its origin in a colloquium held in 2005 at the European University Institute in Florence, organized by Peter Wagner, Johann Arnason, Bo Stråth, and Björn Wittrock. The papers given and discussed there in a stimulating atmosphere and under ideal conditions were later profoundly revised or rewritten.
and complemented by others that seemed needed to realize the concept and framework of this volume as they emerged during those discussions. I thank the Institute and the Swedish Collegium of Advanced Study in the Sciences for financial support and generous hospitality, the organizers of the colloquium for their efforts in starting this project, the contributors for their patient and productive collaboration, my fellow editor, Johann Arnason, for his inspiration and leadership, and Al Bertrand and his collaborators at Wiley-Blackwell for their enthusiastic support of this project and the entire series. Johann Arnason would like to thank the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung for supporting a research stay at the University of Frankfurt/Main, during which his contributions to this volume were finalized. Both editors thank Jennifer Lewton Yates for compiling the two indices.

Kurt A. Raaflaub
Seventy years ago, José Ortega y Gasset began his reflections on the Roman Empire with a very strong claim on behalf of his chosen subject: “The history of Rome, by virtue of its content and of the comprehensiveness of our knowledge of it, may well be called a model history” (Ortega y Gasset 1946: 11; the essay was written in 1940, in exile in Argentina, and reflects a strong inclination to draw parallels between the crisis of the Roman Empire and Europe’s twentieth-century predicament). In fact, the original formulations were even stronger: Ortega declares “es paradigma,” where the English translator suggests a model, and he refers to “madurez” rather than comprehensiveness, thus clearly indicating ripe insight rather than merely extensive knowledge. He was taking a widely held but diffuse view of the Roman record to extreme lengths. It must be added that, as he then saw it, the picture had only just been completed: Rostovtzeff had done for the Principate what Mommsen had done for the Republic, and thus made the period that began with the Augustan settlement and ended with the third-century crisis an integral part of the paradigm. The reassessment of late antiquity was not yet on the agenda. An interpretation in Ortega’s spirit, built on Mommsen and Rostovtzeff, would not necessarily be undermined by this most recent addition to our knowledge of the Roman world: late antiquity could be seen as a phase of resurgence coming after the crisis so memorably portrayed (and, as scholarly consensus now has it, over-interpreted) by Rostovtzeff. But no such approaches are represented in current scholarship; no historical sociologist would subscribe to the claims quoted at the beginning. In fact, the pendulum has swung very far indeed in the opposite direction: there are, as will be shown at greater length below, good grounds to

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suggest that the Roman experience is one of the relatively neglected areas of comparative history, and that specific themes to be explored must be cleared of assumptions and connotations that have blocked broader perspectives. From that point of view, the most obvious reason for going back to Ortega would be the contrast that highlights present failure to give Rome its due. There is, however (as I will try to show), more to the abandoned view than that. Although there can be no question of reestablishing Roman history as a “paradigm,” a closer look at the key issues will confirm its quite exceptional significance for comparative studies, and thus in the end allow us to extract a grain of truth from Ortega’s overstatement.

A more focused discussion of Rome’s place in comparative history may begin with three conspicuously relevant categories: states, empires, and civilizations. All are recurrent themes of comparative studies, and intuitively applicable to the Roman case. One of the chapters in this book will discuss the Roman pattern of relations between the three historical frameworks at greater length, and thus approach comparative questions from within the specific configuration that is our main topic; here the aim is, rather, to summarize the evidence and clarify the reasons for inadequate accounts of the Roman record. Each of the three perspectives suggests particular lessons to be noted.

Seeing Rome as a State: Flaws and Achievements

The scholarly literature on statehood and state formation is very rich, but a few particularly broadly conceived surveys stand out, and a brief glance at their problems with the Romans will be useful. To understand the difficulties, basic ambiguities besetting the very concept of the state should be borne in mind. As Mogens Herman Hansen argues in his discussion of city-state cultures (Hansen 2000: 11–34), multiple and mutually incompatible definitions of statehood dispute the field of comparative political history, and the question of city-states brings the disagreement to a head; in fact, those who prefer a modernistic conception of the state will never settle for a general category of city-state, but try to replace it with emic terms borrowed from each particular tradition. However, Hansen’s attempt to solve the problem by allocating divergent notions of statehood to different disciplines is less convincing. It is not the case that historians and social scientists agree on a broad concept of the state, applying to a long premodern history, while legal scholars and political scientists stick to the modern criteria first theorized by Machiavelli and Hobbes. The opinions of historians, including authorities on Greek and Roman antiquity, are divided; a strong current still supports the view that the state, as an impersonal apparatus of domination, is a late medieval and/or early modern European invention. When this ongoing dispute is confronted with the record of the Roman Republic, the ambiguity of the evidence goes beyond the general problematic of city-states. On the one hand, Roman political thought – and the political imaginary behind it – is commonly credited with taking the notion of res publica to a higher level of abstraction than the Greek tradition had done. On
the other hand, the Roman political regime was to a very high degree embedded in social hierarchies of status and power. The key role of aristocratic families and their networks of *clientelae*, formal as well as informal, is the most visible aspect of a general pattern that is often seen as the very opposite of statehood. There are, in other words, obvious reasons for divergent views, and even for changes to conceptual frameworks. Christian Meier’s second thoughts about the crisis of the Republic are a striking example of the latter: in his *Res publica amissa*, he referred to a “Roman unity of state and society” (Meier 1980: 156), but the introduction to a later edition (1997) expresses radical doubt about this modernizing terminology and argues for an explicit shift from state-centered interpretations to a more general understanding of the political.

As has long been seen, the Principate was a compromise. It established a new political center, with correspondingly different relations to its social basis, but in doing so it added new ambiguities. On the one hand, the whole governmental apparatus was adapted to the demands of imperial rule on a vastly expanded scale, and for some historians, this represents progress toward a more advanced level of statehood; Claude Nicolet (1990), for example, has described the Principate as a significant but inconclusive stage on the road to the modern state. On the other hand, several features that mark the new version of the imperial order seem to undermine this claim. The autocratic power center was adapted to the republican institutions in ingenious and effective ways but, by the same token, suffered from a certain under-institutionalization of its more innovative aspects; hence the overpowering emphasis on the person of the ruler and a corresponding weakness of the foundations for continuous and impersonal statehood; hence, too, a permanent temptation to redefine the terms of the compromise and move toward a stronger version of rulership. The emperors who pursued such aims in particularly upsetting ways (Caligula, Nero, Domitian, and perhaps even Commodus) were demonized by historians coming from a senatorial background, but are now portrayed in a more balanced fashion by modern scholarship. None of them achieved lasting results. On the other hand, the strategies and arrangements devised to compensate for shortcomings of the center included the exercise of power through urban communities with local autonomy, but also – another side of the same coin – an empire-wide delegation of power to oligarchies embedded in sociocultural configurations of honor and status. These features of the regime raise further doubts about the application of state-centered models.

In view of this record, it is not surprising that the Roman achievement has, for all its intuitive appeal, been a difficult case for comparative work on state structures and state formation. The most seminal inquiry of this kind, Norbert Elias’s study of the civilizing process (Elias 2000), begins with the fragmented post-Roman condition of early Western Christendom; the Roman trajectory, including the dis-integrative dynamic of its Western finale, is a part of the historical background that is tacitly taken for granted. Neither the persistence of Roman traditions in the Church nor the reactivation of Roman law at a later stage are recognized as factors contributing to state formation. A whole school of thought has taken off from
Elias’s work and expanded the original framework in different directions, but, to the best of my knowledge, there has been no serious attempt to bring Roman themes into this broader picture. Neither comparisons of the long-term Roman and European trajectories, nor genealogical links between them, nor European rediscoveries and reappropriations of the Roman legacy have been given their due in enlarged versions of the Eliasian program. And the most focused attempt to challenge the Eliasian assumptions, Charles Tilly’s work on coercion and capital (Tilly 1990), does not raise questions about Roman connections.

Another interesting example is S. E. Finer’s history of government, undoubtedly the most ambitious work of its kind, and eminently thought-provoking even when it fails to convince. Here the emphasis is on the typology of state forms rather than on the dynamics of state formation, and the approach to Roman political history is determined by that context. A striking aspect of Finer’s account is a sharp distinction between the Republic and the Principate. As Finer saw it, the Republican order was a very strange case of cultural strengths saving an incoherent political regime from itself. The constitution as such was “preposterous” (Finer 1997: I.440), an outcome of a long sequence of improvised maneuvers and compromises invariably designed to preserve the core of oligarchic power while conceding some of the accessories and appearances. If it worked for a long time, it did so “in spite of itself, … because of unwritten conventions that its provisions should, effectively, be side-stepped” (ibid.). And although Finer does not make the point in so many words, it would be in the spirit of his argument to add that when this fundamentally fraudulent order began to fall apart, the same conventions – and the whole complex of cultural traditions behind them – aggravated the crisis: they blocked thinking about an alternative. What they did not do was to confer any kind of dignity on the unfolding political process. During the last century of the Republic, “the practice of politics in Rome was thoroughly degenerate,” marked by “no more sophistication, disinterestedness, or nobility than in a Latin American banana republic” (ibid.). Only the exceptional geopolitical dimensions of the struggle and the scope they gave to a few outstandingly able individuals could to some extent sustain illusions about this rotten core of the regime.

One reason for taking note of Finer’s views is that no modern analyst seems to have come closer to standing Polybius on his head. The superior rationality of the mixed constitution is dismissed as a myth, hiding the reality of incoherent arrangements that depended on extra-political resources for survival; and although the cultural traits of the Republic are acknowledged as military assets, the overall perspective on the republican empire – including the protracted period of crisis that set in soon after the triumphs observed by Polybius – stresses imperial success as a source of illusions about the regime at home, rather than a testimony to its virtues. The Principate is a different story, and it is only because of its achievements that we can credit the Romans with a distinctive input into the history of government. Even if some of the developments in question go back to Republican beginnings, their potential was more fully realized in the Principate. Once again, it is tempting to read the argument as a counterpoint to Polybius: the real achievement of the
Romans was not so much the conquest as the maintenance and perpetuation of empire, and it took the Principate to establish the connection between political regime and imperial reach that Polybius had erroneously attributed to the Republic. The innovations thus coming to fruition were meta-constitutional rather than constitutional.

For Finer, it is important to distinguish these Roman inventions from a much older set of imperial traditions and techniques with which they were combined. Historians have sometimes failed to grasp this distinction. A polyglot empire ruled in part by bureaucratic methods (however rudimentary by later standards) and in part through semi-autonomous urban communities was nothing new: such formations had a long history in the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean. The real innovations had more to do with statehood as such than with forms of imperial rule, even if they were implemented on an imperial scale. Finer lists four of them, and they are all worth closer examination. The first is the creation of a “consocial state” (1997: I.601); in fact, this term covers two different trends. On the one hand, it refers to the unification of oligarchy, “a ruling stratum throughout the empire which took no account of race, nation, language, colour, religion or culture, but looked only to wealth and local influence” (ibid.). This is a new variation on the theme most famously developed by Ronald Syme: Rome as a paradigm of oligarchic rule (and since the permanence of oligarchy was, for Syme, the most basic fact of political life, that raises Rome to the level also claimed by Ortega, although not for quite the same reasons). Oligarchy was certainly real and pervasive enough to impress itself on historians with otherwise different thematic foci; Finer’s particular twist has to do with a supposedly unprecedented standardization of oligarchic status across the huge imperial domain. This view is open to various objections. German historians (especially Rilinger 2007) have drawn attention to the coexistence of incongruent stratification patterns within the empire; there was no consistent overarching system with a unified elite at the top. The persistence of key republican institutions under the Principate meant, above all, that the Senate as the apex of the aristocratic order continued to occupy a preeminent place, never submerged in the “empire-network of oligarchs” which Finer sees as the real core of the consocial state. The autocratic ruler – and the power structure that took shape around him – was also an incommensurably superior part of the imperial hierarchy, and with ramifications at more symbolic levels. If it is true that the empire was to a considerable extent integrated through a ranking order of honor (Lendon 1990), it should also be noted that a specific version of this order, not necessarily congruent with all others, crystallized around the emperor.

In short, Finer’s description of a uniform oligarchy seems vastly overstated. The other aspect of his consocial state is the development from a ruling city to a ruling province (Italy), then to “Romania” as an integrated imperial realm, and thus beyond the “narrowly specific meaning of empire” (1997: I.602). Here the argument seems to shift from social structure to collective identity. The most obvious objection is that the ruling city remained central to the imperial imaginary – so much so that when the capital had to be shifted, it could only be envisaged as a new
If historians talk about the “incomplete identity” of the ruling province (Giardina 1997), one major reason is the enduring and overwhelming presence of Rome as an eternal center. That applies, a fortiori, to “Romania”; moreover, the latter identity could only progress at the expense of a very wide spectrum of older ones, more or less resilient, and had to be superimposed on a Greco-Roman division. The very existence of “Romania,” or rather the degree of reality which it attained, is a matter of debate and ongoing historical research, rather than an established fact to be listed among Roman achievements.

Finer’s second point is the most decisive one, and it touches upon a permanently contested issue. His view is that the Romans were the “first to conceive of a res publica, a nexus of goods, activities and institutions which belonged at large”; he even adds that Roman “constitutional development embodies the idea of political authority as something abstract and not personal” (1997: I.602; this suggests a more benign judgment on the Republic than the one quoted above). It seems impossible to claim that the Greeks had no idea of a public sphere “belonging at large.” It can, as noted above, be argued that the Roman res publica represented a higher level of abstraction; the piecemeal solutions to the conflict between patricians and plebeians pointed in that direction; and the most advanced expressions of political thought during the crisis of the Republic took this trend one step further. But Finer’s interpretation goes beyond these criteria and seems to portray the Roman notion of government as a unique approximation to modern ideas of statehood. Some basic problems with this claim have already been indicated. The res publica was made up of very unequally weighted social components, and that set limits to its structural autonomy. In the political sphere, the “de facto normative, if not strictly legislative authority of the senate” (Beard 1990: 43) was a major counterweight to what Finer calls the abstraction of authority. When the republican order was adapted to an autocratic center, the traditional qualifications of the res publica lost ground, but new ones were added. To cut a long story short, the developments that Finer construes as a breakthrough are better understood as a complex of relative trends, circumscribed and modified by counter-trends. His analysis decontextualizes certain aspects of the Roman experience, and it is linked to another move of the same kind. In his view “the Roman legacy disappeared” (1997: I.604) in the West, and it was only several centuries later that some parts of it were rediscovered. Here the decontextualizing approach leads to an unwarranted separation of tradition from history: the continuity of the former is reestablished after a long historical break. Recent scholarship on the transformation of the Roman world – this notion has to all intents and purposes replaced the traditional paradigm of imperial decline and fall – suggests a different perspective. There was no wholesale disappearance of the Roman legacy; various aspects of it entered into the making of medieval kingdoms from the outset.

Finer’s two last points are best discussed together. They have to do with the “ubiquity of the law in both the public and the private sector,” and with the “nature of this law” which “exists in a purely human dimension” (1997: I.603). To put it another way, the Romans pioneered the rationalization and secularization of law, defining it as a “set of general principles, plus a juridical technique for applying
these to concrete cases in all their singularity”; a logical corollary of this rationalizing process was the establishment of a “juridical world of free-willing and equal individuals” (1997: I.604). There is no doubt that these statements express – in a particularly forceful way – a widely shared understanding of the Roman achievement in one of its most central fields. It is all the more appropriate to add that recent work has brought some correctives to bear on that view, and in so doing suggested a more nuanced comparative approach. A far-reaching secularization of legal norms and legal expertise accompanied the political development of the Roman Republic, and this made both the intrinsic character and the sociocultural status of Roman law very different from the sacred law that prevailed in Jewish, Islamic, or – in yet another way – Hindu traditions. These well-established facts are not being contested, but it can be argued that they constitute only one side of the story. The other side is that a specific “nexus of law and religion” (Ando and Rüpke 2006: 12) remained in force and influenced the later shift to Christian conceptions of legal order. A religious context is, on this view, important to the understanding of Roman religion and its place in comparative history: “Republican law, then, erected boundaries around religion even as it recognized its centrality. Human institutions were recognized for what they were, and limits were established that respected the agency of the gods”; the same authors add that “we come to know Roman law at a time when it had already been laicized, and what we witness in the classical period is the recursive inscription of religion both within the law and as a form of law” (2006: 12–13). This line of argument has far-reaching implications. Here we can only note in passing that it adds force to an older analysis which stresses the common and enduring limits of Greek and Roman ideas about law, and more particularly the dominant assumption that a legislative order concerns the citizens of a given political community. Within this model, there could be specific norms concerning interaction in a more global arena, but they should not be mistaken for notions of a transcending legal order (Wolff 1971).

Between Empire and Civilization

As we have seen, questions about Roman statehood lead to considerations on the empire. But when it comes to a comparative focus on the empire as such, the situation is very different from the one we have just surveyed. On the one hand, it is much easier and more intuitively convincing to think of Rome as an empire than as a state. The Roman example has, on two different levels, become an inbuilt premise of discourses on empire. Rome was the acknowledged ancestor and model of all aspiring Western empires, those with continental European ambitions as well as those that expanded overseas (the rivalry and the succession of imperial projects have to a great extent shaped the course of Western history, even if the failure to achieve lasting imperial unity is also one of its most significant features). The Roman precedent also entered into all attempts to understand and compare empires on a more global scale; cultural memories of Rome affected the perception and
interpretation of analogous phenomena in other parts of the world. But this Roman bias of the historical imagination has never translated into similarly Roman-centered analytical and comparative work. Some of the reasons for this have to do with exceptional characteristics of the Roman Empire. A closer look at them will bring the Romans back in, but in a new capacity: rather than representing a model or paradigm, their historical experience appears as a unique combination of unusual features, and thus as a particularly instructive key to the contrasts and variations that comparative studies of empires have to consider. The Roman case becomes, in other words, a prime reminder of the heterogeneous, changing, and contingent forces involved in empire formation; these general features of the field must be properly grasped before imposing any kind of unifying framework.

A short account of Roman exceptionalism might begin with the relationship between city-state and empire. The point is not simply that a city-state conquered huge territories and converted itself into an empire, far more successfully than any other expanding polity taking off from a similar basis. More significantly, the dual political framework of city-state and empire remained essential from early beginnings to the final restructuring phase; a rebalancing of the two components, rather than a replacement of one by the other, was central to the most traumatic transformation of the Roman order (the rise of the Principate); and the centrality of Rome was a permanent part of the imperial self-image. There seems to be no parallel to this enduring but adaptable intertwining of city-state and empire. Even the partial comparisons that are sometimes suggested must be toned down. The Spartan hegemony that prevailed in a part of the Greek world was too limited to be classified as an imperial regime. The “Athenian empire” is arguably a misnomer (and this seems to be the reasoning behind Ian Morris’s reference to “the Greater Athenian State” [2009: 99–177]). In this case, a city-state developed hubristic ambitions in the wake of an exceptional military achievement and an internal political transformation of a uniquely radical kind, and went beyond traditional models of hegemony; but the attempt did not last long enough to work out a balance between ambitions and environment (see also Raaflaub, this volume).

Comparisons with earlier developments in the Ancient Near East have tended to focus on Assyria as an apparently clear-cut case of transition from city-state to empire. As Mario Liverani argues in his contribution to this volume, closer examination reveals a more complicated picture. But at this point, one striking contrast between Rome and Assyria is worth noting. “The idea of monarchy was born with the emergence of the Assyrian state and the two grew to maturity together like twins” (Grayson 1991: 199). The Roman trajectory was very different. The consolidation of Rome as a city-state and a regional power took place under a monarchic regime. A crisis that was obviously caused by domestic as well as regional factors brought the monarchy down, and this coincided with a setback to Roman power in Central Italy. The following very long phase of sustained expansion was organized by a regime that was not only based on non-monarchic institutions, but also characterized by an unusually strong anti-monarchic political culture. It was this expansionist republic that made Rome unchallengeable within the Mediterranean world.
Comparative studies on empires have sometimes suggested a structural connection or at least an elective affinity between imperial rule and a strong monarchy tending to autocracy; there is some historical evidence to support this claim, and it can also be argued on more theoretical grounds. Imperial visions of superior and – in the most important cases – world-dominating power are, *ceteris paribus*, eminently compatible with aspirations to autocracy as a higher form of monarchy. The two aspects converge in elevating a power center beyond the constraints and challenges operative at a lower level. The Roman experience suggests that we should qualify and contextualize the connection, rather than reject it outright. The Republic managed to neutralize the autocratic logic of imperial expansion for a remarkably long time, but in the end, it was the main neutralizing mechanism – a highly regulated and ritualized regime of competition within the ruling class – that reopened the door to monarchy in a markedly autocratic form. This paradoxical turn, however, cannot be understood as a case of simple adaptation to imperial logic. The monarchy that took over was a complex historical phenomenon: overdetermined by the encounter with Hellenistic models, circumscribed by republican institutions that had to be preserved in modified forms, and durably affected by contingent features of the Augustan settlement. On the other hand, the foundational phase of the Principate confirmed the link between autocracy and conquest: an unprecedented bout of expansion helped to consolidate the new regime, and more of the same was obviously envisaged. But setbacks then led to an acknowledgment of limits that were not massively transgressed during the subsequent history of the empire (see also Ziolkowski’s chapter in this volume). To round off the picture, it should be noted that expansion was not quite taken off the agenda. New conquests and offensives were still launched by emperors who needed to secure their hold on power or project images of strength and renewal. But initiatives of that kind were limited, the results even more so, and the main post-Augustan additions – Britain and Dacia – were abandoned before the final fragmentation of the empire set in.

In short, the Roman record of monarchy and empire is a complex story, and markedly different from the pattern of mutually reinforcing growth found in many other cases. The rise to uncontested imperial supremacy was achieved without concessions to monarchy; the most massive expansionist push was an integral part of the transition from republic to Principate; but once the autocratic regime was in place, maintenance took priority over conquest. There are other peculiarities to be considered. It is a commonplace that the pre-Christian Roman Empire did not, unlike some others, rely on a universal religion or a comprehensive cultural model to legitimize its rule or unify its domains. But it has also been shown – although perhaps not universally agreed – that notions of religious or cultural tolerance are misleading. The Romans did not – *pace* Finer – simply continue a tradition of tolerant rule over a multilingual and multicultural empire, represented at its best by their Persian predecessors. The uniquely Roman blend of cultural and political power lies somewhere between the two poles, and more precise descriptions of it have proved highly controversial.
Some of the liveliest recent debates on Roman history have centered on the notion of Romanization, and some critics have proposed to discard it altogether; this view seems inspired by postcolonial preconceptions of the more extreme kind (a refusal to credit empires with any kind of cultural productivity), and should be dismissed as an ideological aberration. If it has nevertheless gained a hearing, this is due to difficulties encountered when the character and the limits of Romanization are to be grasped in more specific terms. The Roman practice of ruling through urban communities (and creating them where they did not exist before) entailed the diffusion of corresponding modes of life; it is true that this development involved adaptation to local customs and conditions, and that its social impact was limited, but these considerations are not sufficient reasons for rejecting the idea of Romanization as a process that linked cultural assimilation to political control. On the ideological level, these cultural components of Roman rule were translated into the notion of *humanitas*; its practical impact should not be overestimated (to take a salient counterexample, it was not in the same league as Confucian models of cultivation), but it does belong to the distinctive pattern of relations between empire and culture that sets the Roman case apart from others.

As for the religious dimension, it is still a matter of debate among scholarly authorities whether we can speak of Roman imperial religion or only about religions of the empire – perhaps even cults of the empire, as suggested by those who suspect anachronistic connotations in the very term “religion.” It is, in any case, clear that Romanizing trends in religious culture must be analyzed in the context of a much older and more comprehensive mode of religious life: the rules of mutual translation and identification that had already prevailed between the polytheisms of the Ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean world. If this tradition, as Jan Assmann argues (Assmann 1996), was a civilizing achievement, the description also implies a capacity to counteract imperial leveling. That said, it can nevertheless be argued that specific Romanizing processes unfolded within the given limits. Roman conceptions of proper ways to communicate with the gods had a certain impact on cultic practices throughout the imperial domain; in exceptional but not irrelevant cases (Druid and Dacian religion), this led to the suppression of pre-Roman traditions. The empire-wide compromise with Judaism reflected a distinctively Roman way of regulating diversity. Last but not least, and whatever particular sense we make of the assimilation of imperial dignity to divine status (not to be mistaken for complete equation), it seems undeniable that “the position of Augustus atop the empire allowed the Mediterranean world to share a deity for the first time” (Ando 2000: 407).

All this changed when the imperial center converted to Christianity. No empire of comparable size and strength ever underwent a religious mutation of such magnitude (the incorporation of Daoism and Buddhism into the religious framework of the restored sixth- and seventh-century Chinese Empire amounted to a major change, but the older tradition of imperial Confucianism was also revived, and in this case the sacral status of the imperial center as such was more important). The change affected both sides. Historians have spoken of the “end of ancient
Christianity” in connection with the end of imperial rule in the West and the consolidation of the papacy as the sole center of Western Christendom; it seems equally justified to describe the Constantinian turn as the end of early Christianity and the beginning of the late antique phase in Church history. Christianity shaped the cultural profile of late antiquity, but it was also reshaped by the overall context of the period. The latter point has certainly not been ignored, but so far it seems to have received less attention than the first one. To reiterate the claim to uniqueness, there is no comparable example of interconnected successive mutations of a world empire and a universal religion.

The growing importance of regional perspectives in comparative history has raised new questions about empires; both their relationship to regional bases and their impact on regional patterns have varied considerably across historical and geographical contexts. In this regard, there is one more unique feature of the Roman Empire to be mentioned. The contrast between contiguous territorial empires (the premodern Eurasian type) and transoceanic ones, first created in the course of European expansion, has been duly noted. But the Roman Empire was the only one to rule over the whole region around an inland sea and make this sea its main axis of integration. The search for analogies to the Mediterranean in other parts of the world has not been very successful. The main contenders are the Baltic-North Sea complex in Northern Europe (Gerner et al. 2002) and the maritime part of Southeast Asia (Lombard 1990) but neither of these two regions gave rise to a unifying empire. The Mediterranean has nevertheless been a particularly rewarding theme for historians interested in regional structures, and the most recent major work on the subject (Horden and Purcell 2000) brings the discussion closer to classical antiquity, but further analysis will be needed to integrate this evolving line of scholarship into debates on the Roman Empire.

Among all unusual characteristics of the Roman Empire, its Greco-Roman cultural identity is perhaps the most striking. No other imperial formation developed a similarly bipolar pattern. Historians of East Asia have become increasingly interested in changing combinations of Chinese and Inner Asian imperial traditions, and moved away from the earlier assumption that conquerors were completely absorbed into Chinese civilization; but the crucial difference is that the empires built by conquering nomads were to a very great extent adapted to Chinese political institutions, whereas the Romans never borrowed political models from the Greeks. From the middle period of Islamic history onward, Turco-Mongol traditions coexisted with Arab or Persian ones within various imperial regimes, but in these cases Islam imposed a broader civilizational unity. The Greco-Roman constellation seems unique. Contributors to this volume will discuss various aspects of it; here we may note a few points emerging from recent scholarship and important for comparative approaches.

The Roman impact on the Greek world was too significant for the notion of a continuous and progressive assimilation to Greek models to be tenable: “the ‘Greek city’ of the Imperial period would be more correctly described as ‘Greco-Roman’: that is, as a fusion or mélange of languages and institutions, types of public
entertainment, architectural forms, and religious institutions” (Millar 1993: 238). It is, of course, equally true that there were massive limits to this fusion. If there are good reasons to think of Romanization in general as a partial process, this applies even more to the Greek East than to the West (Greek areas in Southern Italy and Sicily were a special case). But as the same author stresses, the limits never translated into a clash of cultures: “no Greek cities, or groups of cities, offered any parallel to the major Jewish revolts of AD 66–74 and 132–5” (1993: 250). What did happen was a sustained reaffirmation of Greek cultural identity, especially in the second century CE, but in ways that did not contest or contradict imperial loyalties (Woolf 1994) and could even be encouraged by the imperial center. This remarkable balance between the two components of the empire was, in the long run and within the surviving eastern part of the imperial domain, followed by an undeniable shift toward the Greek pole, but not to the extent suggested by Millar when he writes that “in the end Graecia capta did indeed imprison her captor” (Millar 1993: 250). On the one hand, the Eastern Empire that became Byzantium preserved too much of the Roman legacy (beginning with what German historians call the Kaiseridee, the very notion of an emperor) for that to be an acceptable description; on the other hand, the Greek culture that achieved the final comeback was already a part of a new formation decisively influenced by non-Greek sources, that is, Christianity.

Both Greek and Roman patterns operated on a macro-cultural scale, superimposed on a vast spectrum of local traditions and societies. They were, in other words, civilizational frameworks. This brings us to a third keyword for comparative studies. Civilizational issues will be considered from various angles in the following chapters. Here a brief comment will suffice. The fact that the Roman experience has not figured prominently in recent work on comparative civilizational themes is obvious, and so is the main reason for it. Far more than any other topic, the question of the Axial Age and its civilizational legacies has dominated the field, and it was difficult to find a place for Rome in this context. Nobody has ever suggested that there was a Roman cultural transformation comparable to those undergone by Ancient Greece, Israel, India, and China around the middle of the last millennium BCE; very few – but not uninteresting – attempts have been made to show how this non-axial record can be reconciled with Rome’s obvious world-historical importance. The shift from “civilizations of the Axial Age” to “axial civilizations,” that is, from a period to a type, and towards a common pattern defined in more abstract terms, has aggravated the problem and made it even harder to find a proper conceptual focus for the Roman experience. A move in the opposite direction, toward a more diversified account of transformations during the Axial Age, might open up new possibilities of comparison, but this has so far been very much a minority option. And to link this problematic more effectively to our present subject, we would need to include the Greco-Roman relationship in its changing forms, and without any reductionist preconceptions, as an integral part of the Roman experience. Greek civilization has always been treated as one of the key axial cases; recent work has underlined its specific features; and if its impact on Roman history is
taken into account, the prospects for comparative analysis will look more promising. This theme will be taken up in some of the chapters in this volume.

This brief survey has noted obstacles and unresolved problems related to the very themes that ought to be most central to comparative inquiry in our field. The picture would be incomplete without mentioning recent attempts to strengthen the Roman connection on a more empirical level, without any systematic reference to the conceptual foci mentioned above, but in ways that can lead to reappraisals of more theoretical issues. Two recent developments of this kind stand out. A French survey of political regimes in world history was meant to include two volumes on empires, one on the European sequence of imperial powers and another on major non-European cases. Within the European context, the obvious importance of the Roman model sets the agenda for the whole project: “There is no empire in the West without reference to the Roman one. There is, in the last instance, only one empire: the Roman one” (Tulard 1997: 14). But this emphatic acknowledgment of Roman primacy is not followed by any systematic clarification of the Roman impact on the formation and the historical dynamics of later Western empires. Medieval and modern cases of more or less stable imperial rule are described in some detail, but there is no comprehensive framework for the analysis of connections and references to the Roman background. Such an approach would, at one end of the spectrum, consider the differences between regions directly and indirectly affected by Roman power, and their respective conditions for empire formation (it is, for example, not irrelevant to the course of medieval history that the center of a supposedly resurrected Roman empire shifted from a former province – the core domain of the Frankish kingdom – to an area on the other side of the former imperial border); at the other end, there are the various uses of imperial symbolism inherited from the Romans. A further point to be noted is that the metamorphoses of the Roman legacy unfolded in different ways within the three successor civilizations. Among other things, the Western Christian centrality of the papacy, capable of innovations paving the way for state formation but not of replacing the empire, set specific limits to imperial ventures. In the Byzantine world, an empire that claimed to continue Roman rule was confronted with alternative empires that could even aspire to conquer the original imperial center (the Bulgarian and, more briefly and controversially, the Serbian one). Finally, the question of enduring Roman influences on the emerging Islamic world must be discussed in relation to two decisive framing factors: the gradual retreat from an initially very strong version of sacral rulership (the Caliphate) and the subsequent appropriation of Persian statecraft. In short, these multiple sequels call for a combination of genealogical and comparative perspectives. More strictly comparative approaches would be appropriate when it comes to a broader focus on non-Western imperial traditions. The unfinished state of the project in question seems to reflect the difficulties encountered on this level: the planned second volume has not been published.

The second, more recent line of comparative inquiry focuses on contrasts and parallels between Rome and China. Two representative examples are the
collections edited by Walter Scheidel (2009) and by Fritz-Heiner Mutschler and Achim Mittag (2008). The former deals mainly with the structural and institutional aspects of imperial power, while the latter analyzes the cultural transformations that accompanied empire-building, especially those that involved new forms of historical consciousness. This is not the place to discuss the two volumes in detail, but they should be noted as landmark contributions to a long-neglected and very promising field of comparative studies. Rome and China are arguably the two most significant imperial formations in world history – because of their sheer magnitude in space and time, their overall impact, and the cultural developments linked to their political trajectories. As it happens, the comparison is made easier by one of the most striking contingent parallels in recorded history: Rome and China emerged as unrivaled regional centers at roughly the same time around 200 BCE. Major contrasts between the internal as well as external contexts of empire formation are evident from the outset. In the Roman world, the most important legacy inherited from a prior phase of state formation was a widespread and adaptable political culture of city-states, whereas the Chinese empire drew on traditions of statecraft developed during a long struggle between larger territorial states. On the external side, there was no East Asian parallel to the enduring antagonism of Rome and Persia; but, on the other hand, the barbaricum with which the Roman empire shared a northern frontier never gave rise to counter-empires of the kind created by China’s Inner Asian neighbors already in the time of the Han dynasty (and there could, a fortiori, be no synthesis of two imperial traditions, such as those emerging from the contest of the Inner and East Asian ones). The crises that in both cases took an explosive turn during the third century CE were due to a changing mix of internal and external factors. In the short run, it was the Roman Empire that responded more effectively and restored unity after a very brief period of fragmentation, whereas its Chinese counterpart entered a much longer period of division (this record has been overshadowed by the later history of persisting imperial unity in China and multistate rivalry in Europe). The Chinese return to a unified imperial order went hand in hand with a civilizational expansion that spread Chinese models into a larger regional arena and created a Sinic rather than simply Chinese world. This happened, once again, at roughly the same time as the civilizational partition of the Roman world. The Chinese pattern of transformation did not involve a religious revolution comparable to the victory of Christianity in the West, and by the same token there were no East Asian analogies to the East–West split within Christianity or the Islamic reform of monotheism. The Chinese phase of fragmentation was marked by religious innovation, drawing on internal sources (Daoism) as well as contacts with another civilizational complex (Buddhism), but these developments were compatible with more civilizational continuity than in the West.

In short, Roman and Chinese experiences seem to offer particularly interesting perspectives for comparative research, and further issues could be added to the above list. But to round off this introductory discussion, one more trend in contemporary scholarship should be mentioned. In this case, theoretical problems are