MILITITARY SUPPRESSION OR WILLING SUBMISSION – WHAT WAS THE SECRET WHICH KEPT SO MANY DIVERSE NATIONS WILLING SUBJECTS OF ROME?

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We live in an age of nation states, which has seen the break-up of the great European empires, the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Basque separatism, an outcry for independence from Catalonia, and ongoing efforts by Wales and Scotland to obtain more self-government. From this viewpoint, the success of Rome in harnessing the loyalty of cultures as diverse as Greece, Egypt, the Middle East and the Italian cities and the Celtic tribes seems bizarre. American movies showing highly disciplined Roman armies on the march give an impression of military power which suggests that this was what kept the Roman empire together. The few remaining Roman amphitheatres, and the many more which have been discovered or excavated suggest domination by a culture which was soaked in blood. However, none of these things can explain how a single city with an army of about 360,000 men, mainly stationed on the Northern frontier could control such a vast area without the willing submission of its subjects. This article looks for other answers – not so much in a direct analysis the archaeology or of the literature of the times as by reading between the lines and seeing how this matches up with known facts. I believe Rome’s secret evolved incrementally over time and became part of a tradition which was handed down through the governing classes. It was never committed to writing, as if this had been done it could have resulted in an insurrection.

The Roman empire was a stable republic until about 100BC. There followed 75 years of instability and civil war, as order broke down while two main political factions sought to resolve their differences by force of arms. From about 25BC until about 200AD, stability returned and Mediterranean world was well governed. After 200AD until the end of the western Empire in 476AD, things were never quite the same. This article is concerned with the empire during these two centuries.

During this period, there was only one major revolt which came from what we would describe as a “nationalist” movement. This was the Jewish revolt of AD 70, and the war that followed it. This was put down in a brutal way which has never been forgotten by the Jewish nation since. The rebellion of Boudicca in Britain was different. It resulted more from personal spite than national sentiment, and the Roman account of the rebellion seeks out the causes and a lasting remedy for the British hatred for the Romans. The Romans were able to learn from their mistakes, and seem to have done so.

The emperors never liked to have the army too close to Rome – because of fear of military coups. So they reduced the troops to the bare minimum and stationed most of them on the Rhine, the Danube and in Britain. Instead of having a large central reserve, they operated a system of moving troops to the place where they were needed. So, if there was trouble on the Danube, they would move troops from the Rhine to the Danube so as to concentrate their forces their. At the same time, troops could be moved from Britain to the Rhine to replace those moved to the Danube – Britain always having more troops than were needed for the province (Spain had only one legion, whereas three were stationed in Britain). Away from the Northern border, the Roman army would hardly have been noticeable. So Roman rule does not seem to have depended on military domination.

 The Romans never assumed that their culture was the world’s best - the empire had no equivalent of the assumption of “white supremecy” of the 19th Century European world empires. The Roman poet Virgil (Aeneid VI 847 -853) wrote: “others may fashion the pliant bronze more softly, draw living expressions from marble, plead their cases better, mark the limits of the universe with a line and predict the rising o the stars, but you, Roman, be mindful that your skill is to rule the nations, to impose civilisation for peace, to spare your subjects and to war down the proud”. In fact, the Romans produced some beautiful works of art and literature, but they all had to be modelled on the work of Greek artists and authors. Rome looked up to Greece for its culture. The poet Horace wrote about how “captive Greece” tamed her harsh conqueror. Virgil’s Aeneid, one of the greatest masterpieces of world literature, is an original work, but it had to follow the pattern set by the Greek epic poet, Homer, otherwise it would never have been published. Rome’s contribution to this “Graeco-Roman civilisation was mainly in engineering – building roads, amphitheatres, theatres, aqueducts, bridges, lighthouses (don’t forget the one which still stands in Dover castle, or the footings of the one at Scarborough castle) towns and cities etc., its extraordinary legal system and in its highly trained and sophisticated army. The Roman genius was essentially a practical one. Rome knew it had the world’s best army, but that did not make the Romans despise or undervalue provincial cultures. The Roman Empire was multi-national and multi-cultural, with temples dedicated to Roman, Greek, Persian and Egyptian gods, as well as synagogues for the Jews.

 Rome grew from a small Italian city state. It came to dominate Italy through a series of alliances with other cities. If Rome defeated another city, Rome would insist on a treaty of alliance which would require the defeated city to provide contingents to Rome’s armies on demand. Italian cities did not pay tax until quite late on in the empire. So Rome’s “domination “ was based more on diplomacy than on armed force. When Rome extended its domain outside Italy, it employed the same tradition of diplomacy to maintain the loyalty of its provinces.

Even during the empire, Rome had a constitution. Right to the end, Roman government was concerned with the “Res Publica” ( the public interest) and was in theory governed by SPQR (Senatus PopulusQue Romanus – the Senate and the Roman People). The word “imperator” means “commander in chief” – not the “emperor” of our language. He called himself the “Princeps” – the “chief”. His position was more of a president than a hereditary “king of kings”. He was in theory appointed by the senate, which comprised a group of former magistrates, who were originally directly elected by the people, but eventually became imperial appointments. In practice the imperial government resembled what we would call a military junta, headed by a “President for Life”. There were dynasties, but these tended to be short lived – a weak or bad emperor could expect to be deposed by the army – which is why the emperors liked to keep their armies small and as far away from Rome as possible. There was a tradition of what we would call “localism”. City councils throughout the empire elected their own magistrates, and managed their own affairs – including the building of public monuments such as amphitheatres – just as many European cities today fund the building of football stadiums. There was a local election going on in Pompeii when Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD. The imperial government did not interfere, except in collecting taxes and building military roads. There was no need for secret police, as local people would consider themselves autonomous. Judaea was allowed to keep its governing council, the “Sanhedrin”, and every year the chiefs of the tribes in Britain were invited to a celebration in Colchester, where sacrifice was made to the deified Emperor Claudius. Whilst there, they were allowed to vote on only one subject - whether they liked the Roman governor, and presumably if they did not, the emperor would send a replacement!

It is in this context that the biblical account of the trial of Jesus Christ before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, rings true. “You are not Caesar’s friend if you do not crucify him,” the crowd shouted. Pilate washed his hands “of this man’s innocent blood”, but clearly did not want to risk his future career in the imperial service by laying himself open to adverse reports to Rome by the Jewish Sanhedrin.

In other words, Rome used the provincials themselves as a check on the loyalty of its appointed governors. A system of spies or violent repression was not necessary. There is no evidence in the literature of anything like the German guestapo.

A key to understanding the way the Roman empire worked is a study of the education received by the governing classes. This is a difficult point to make in modern society, where there is so much emphasis on social equality, and a general disdain for anything that smacks of “elitism”. The Roman government was certainly elitist, and although literacy was generally high, the best education was only available to a privileged few. However, although most people did not have access to what we would call secondary education, the education which the governing classes received included a full study of the Greek Classics, which were mainly written in Athens at the time of the Athenian democracy. So, although the imperial government was far from democratic, the ideal of all citizens being equal in the sight of the law was a fundamental principle of Roman administration, and resulted in a very humane outlook which benefited all the empire’s inhabitants.

From an early age the children of the governing classes were required to learn Greek – which would not have been an easy language to learn. They therefore had to get the habit of hard academic work.

As mentioned above, this would have reinforced their empathy with directly elected magistrates and local self-government. They also had to study Greek philosophy – particularly the Stoic philosophers, who perhaps invented the concept of what we would call “the stiff upper lip”. One of Rome’s greatest emperors, Marcus Aurelius, wrote a book on Stoic philosophy in Greek. It survives. Philosophy included the study of ethics, which for a Roman was all to do with how to become a good person, or a good ruler. The result of this training would have been a class of administrators who were intelligent, hard working and highly motivated. From 25BC to about 200 AD, the empire had a sound administration, which would have been universally admired and respected.

Every public institution has to have a unique selling point, and Roman Law (together with the Pax Romana) was Rome’s greatest gift to mankind. Originally, Roman law was only available to a restricted class of people – those with Roman citizenship – ie. Italians, discharged soldiers, the inhabitants of certain cities and their descendants, and anybody else who was willing to buy it. One has to ask why the restricted availability? It does seem rather odd – particularly as one might have thought that it was in Rome’s interest that everybody should be treated as a Roman citizen,

 I like to think the system worked like this:

Take Ossian, the Celt, a proud member of the warlike Brigantes tribe in Northern Britain. In theory, his tribe is an ally of Rome – not a subject of Rome. Roman soldiers occasionally pass through Brigantine territory, but they don’t interfere with the local tribal administration, and aren’t bothered by the iniquities of the local justice system (in so far as it might be called a justice system at all). To all intents and purposes, life in Brigantia is no different than before the Romans came – except of course that the Brigantes were no longer free to attack their neighbours or be attacked by them – something that might be considered an advantage to most of the tribesmen, although some might look back nostalgically at “the good old days” when men were men and young men had to prove their valour on the battlefield. Now Ossian has a dispute with his powerful neighbour, who is a friend of the chief. So he goes to the Chief and asks for justice. The chief is very polite, but finds in favour of his friend. Ossian goes away feeling very unhappy.

A few years later, Ossian observes that the chief has a big legal fall out with a powerful Roman who has settled in Bigantine territory. The chief decides to go to Colchester to get justice. The tribesmen shake their heads – how can he possibly win, when he’s litigating against such an important but hated Roman settler? The chief comes back home after winning his case. The tribesmen are amazed. “How did you do that?” they ask. “It’s dead simple,” replies the chief. “I paid my fee to become a Roman citizen, and Roman Law is impartial – it’s amazing! It’s fair, and it really works.” What then does Ossian think? “It’s not fair,” he says. “Why can’t we all be Roman citizens?” And that, I reckon, is exactly what the Roman administration wanted people to think. They wanted everybody to want to be a Roman – much better than risking a rebellion by forcing people to be Romans or by forcing them to submit to Roman law.

What would have happened if Ossian had gone to Colchester and asked for justice under the Roman law, whilst being prepared to tell a few white lies – ie that he was a Roman citizen. Would the judge have turned him away? I don’t think so. Passports were not given to Roman citizens. Discharged soldiers received “diplomas” – a bronze cylinder which was evidence that they were Roman citizens. Presumably similar diplomas were given to people who bought Roman citizenship. No other citizens had certificates of this kind. We have few accounts of how Roman citizenship worked. The best one is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, where St. Paul appeals to a Roman governor on the grounds that he is a Roman citizen. Paul has not lived near Tarsus for years, but his father had Roman citizenship because he had been borne a citizen of Tarsus. In the account of the meeting with the governor, the governor takes Paul’s word at face value and asks for no proof. This makes sense, because if it was in the interest of the imperial administration that everybody should want to be a Roman citizen, what would be the point in turning someone away, or enquiring too deeply into the evidence for citizenship?

Roman citizenship passed from parents to children, and the children would multiply marry and disperse. The original diplomas could get lost or be preserved by a distant relative. If one’s Roman Citizenship was due to one’s residence in a city which had Roman citizenship rights, your Roman citizenship did not end when one moved out of that city, and this status was being conferred on more and more cities as time went by. So over time it would become increasingly difficult to distinguish between people who had and those who did not have Roman citizenship. So, when the emperor Caracalla finally issued an edict in 212 AD conferring Roman citizenship on all free people within the boundaries of the empire, he was probably recognising a fact, rather than making a revolutionary change.

Roman law remains part of the enduring legacy of the Roman Empire. The eastern emperor Justinian codified it a century after the collapse of the empire in the west. His code became the basis of the Code Napoleon in France and the modern day German law code. Japan took its law code from Germany. English Law has a different basis, but when in the past situations have arisen which are not covered by English Law, the judges have been willing to see if the Roman Law had anything to say on the matter. In theory, they can still take Roman Law into account.

When we see the Roman Legions marching across a Holywood film set, perhaps we are more impressed than the Romans would have been. The power of the legions and the psychological impact of the grandeur of some Roman buildings was only part of the Roman state. Rome depended on hard-working, intelligent, highly educated and highly motivated elite governing class who rarely tried to impose Roman culture on a reluctant conquered people by force. Instead they found more subtle ways of encouraging people to feel they belonged to Rome and that Rome belonged to them. There were few popular rebellions, because as every city was free to elect its own magistrates and was autonomously self-governed, there was little reason to rebel. Taxes paid for the army, and the army on the frontiers protected everybody. As Rome remained in theory a republic, the empire would have seemed to most people to be subject to the rule of law and not to the whims of the emperor. The concept of the rule of law, like much else, came from ancient Greece, and the Romans perfected it.

I can’t remember which Greek philosopher said: “It is a mark of genius to rule men with their consent”. The Romans were amazingly successful in welding the empire together. When it finally fell apart, they left Latin as the common language and a yearning for unity amongst the European peoples. This craving for unity was exploited by Theodoric the Ostrogoth, the East Roman emperor Justinian, Charlemagne, the papacy, the emperor Charles V and the Habsburg monarchs, Napoleon, Hitler and more recently by the European Union. Perhaps this explains why today Eurozone governments are so determined to keep the Euro – against all the evidence that they could all be better off without it!