

“The Legislators of Mankind”: Ideas of Rome in the Thought of Edmund Burke

An Honors Thesis for the Department of Political Science

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ABSTRACT:

Scholars have long recognized the influence of Ancient Roman history on the thought of Edmund Burke. Though often associated with gothic medievalism and a seemingly un-classical support for party government, Burke's thought was deeply steeped in Ancient Roman history. Yet, the nature of this relationship has not been adequately explored within the vast literature on the philosophy of the Anglo-Irish statesman. This paper argues that Rome's influence extends to his views on three major objects of his thought: the British Constitution, the British Empire, and the French Revolution. The constitutional structures of the Roman Republic demonstrated the possibility of government organized by party and balanced between the ambitions of divergent social classes. The example of the Roman Empire informed Burke's hopes for a British Empire characterized by political and cultural autonomy for subject peoples and strict standards of accountability for imperial officials. Finally, the expansion of the Roman Empire offered Burke a crucial historical parallel through which to understand the emergence of the French Republic in the international system and how it might be resisted. The Roman dimension of Burke's thought adds greater depth to our understanding of Burke's relationship to constitutionalism, imperialism, and international relations.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	4
INTRODUCTION.....	5
The Education of Edmund Burke.....	9
Burke’s Historical Thought.....	11
Ideas of Rome in Eighteenth-Century Britain.....	12
Burke’s Idea of Rome.....	15
CHAPTER I: “That Famous Constitution”: Burke and the Roman Republic.....	20
National Character.....	22
Corporate Spirit.....	26
The Conflict of the Orders.....	32
The Emperors.....	36
CHAPTER II: “To Spare the Conquered and Subdue the Proud”: Burke and the Roman Empire.....	40
The Roman Empire in <i>An Abridgment</i>.....	43
The New World.....	53
India.....	57
Ireland.....	66
CHAPTER III: “A Martial Republick”: Echoes of Rome in the French Revolution	71
The Revolutionary Cult of Antiquity.....	72
The New Roman Senate.....	76
A Classical Counter-Revolution.....	81
CONCLUSION: Burke’s Two Romes.....	90
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	93

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INTRODUCTION

Leo Strauss observed that Edmund Burke resembled Marcus Tullius Cicero in his analysis of the British Constitution.¹ Similarly, Lambert argued that Burke sought to emulate the Ciceronian ideal of the *novus homo* (new man) who rises through the ranks of greatness through his defense of established institutions.² While much has been written about Burke's substantial and superficial likeness to the great Roman, far less has been said about Burke's relationship to Ancient Rome itself. Due in part to Burke's perceived romantic medievalism and celebration of party government, no study has yet attempted to reconstruct and characterize his views on and use of Roman history throughout his political thought.

An investigation into this topic is necessary for two historical reasons. First, Roman history was a constant and essential point of reference through which the British political nation understood its political system. The Roman ideals of liberty, virtue, and balanced government formed the lodestars of the British Constitution. References to Roman history littered contemporary thought and political polemics. Moreover, a cultural craze for Roman-style,

¹ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 295.

² Elizabeth Lambert, *Edmund Burke of Beaconsfield* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 50-52.

neoclassical art, architecture, theatre, literature, even garden design persisted throughout the 1700s.³ The image of Rome was a politically charged, powerful, and evocative symbol in Burke's lifetime.

Second, Burke's education and career delved deeply into the classics. His Trinity College Dublin curriculum consisted of a range of Roman authors.⁴ References to these authorities abound throughout Burke's writings, from polemical pamphlets to parliamentary speeches to private correspondence. Consequently, the lessons of Roman history and politics were among the many formative influences on Burke's thought. Thinking about the ancients was no less important than thinking about the moderns: "I certainly take my full share, along with the rest of the world, in speculating on what has been done, or is doing, on the public stage; in any place antient or modern; in the Republic of Rome or the Republic of Paris...[sic]"⁵ Moreover, Burke lauded the Romans as the "legislators of mankind," asserting that their institutional achievements possessed a wide application and relevance.⁶ Even the manners and mores of eighteenth-century Europe, softened by commerce, Christianity, and the legacy of medieval chivalry were only "possibly" more distinguished than those "which flourished in the most brilliant periods of the antique world."⁷

Considering Burke's upbringing and the intellectual milieu in which he spoke, wrote, and acted, it is impossible to avoid the question: What lessons did the Roman experience impart to him? The answer to this query is not as simple as it may seem. Except in one of his first books,

³ See Ayres, *Classical Culture and the Idea of Rome in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1-47.

⁴ Richard Bourke, *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 51.

⁵ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 149.

⁶ Edmund Burke, *The Works of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke*, "An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History" (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1877), 320.

⁷ Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 239.

An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History, Burke never examined Roman history as an isolated subject. Instead, he utilized his classical learning as a standard to compare the events of his day. Antiquity in both its historical and literary manifestations served a didactic purpose. The sayings and deeds of the Romans acted as both noble examples to emulate and lamentable follies to avoid. Consequently, Burke's use of this heritage, much like his approach to politics, is dependent on context and circumstance and not easy to generalize. He quotes particular authors whose lessons and morals roughly corresponded with the issues that faced him throughout his career, from Irish civil rights and company rule in India to the American Revolution and, most importantly, the French Revolution. At first glance, it may seem that Burke's allusions and references to the Roman past possess a fragmented and incomplete quality. However, taken together, these inklings point toward a unique view of Roman politics and their implications for British statecraft. This includes three areas crucial to studies of Burke: the British Constitution, the British Empire, and the French Revolution. In exploring Burkean thought on these issues, I will attempt to reconstruct his idea of Rome and demonstrate his debt to the history and ideas of Ancient Rome.

Chapter I begins by assembling Burke's thoughts on the Roman Republic, specifically his understanding of its institutional success and failure. What lessons did Roman history offer Great Britain? Like many of his contemporaries (and indeed many of the Romans), Burke viewed the Republic as dependent on a set of civic virtues, namely filial piety, religious devotion, public-spiritedness, martial prowess, and an overall commitment to making sacrifices for the common good. The classical republican outlook informed Burke's signature views on party government, the social contract, and established religion and their respective significance within the British Constitution. As for the Republic's formal institutions, Burke highlighted the

constitutional importance of corporate bodies representing the interests of social classes and other component groups of Rome's body politic. There was no uniform body called "the Roman people," but rather a variation of orders and gradations marked by differences in property, merit, vocation, and hereditary station. This arrangement not only provided for the political participation of interest groups but also an establishment bulwark against the potential excesses of democratic rule. Sadly, the mixed system of discordant powers ceased to function once the high old Roman virtues disintegrated, paving the way for the emperors. Under the Principate, Roman manners adapted to suit the needs of a political system based on autocratic rule. Although Burke did not give a detailed account of the fall of the Republic and the rise of the Empire, his focus on Roman national character nevertheless stays true to the classical republican tradition.

Chapter II examines Burke's opinions on the Roman Empire, which he primarily expressed in *An Essay Toward Abridgment of English History*. In this, he discussed the colonization of Britain, beginning with Caesar's temporary invasion in the first-century BC up until Rome abandoned the British Isles in the fifth-century AD. When Burke wrote on this subject, Britain's own empire was not far removed from his mind. Although he recognized the limits of classical precedents in analyzing eighteenth-century circumstances (particularly in the American colonies), the Roman example proved crucial to his warnings and exhortations for Britain's global possessions. Roman rule showed that the ideals of justice and common citizenship were not incompatible with imperial practice. In Burke's commentary on British imperialism in India and Ireland, Rome stands as an exemplar for a prudent and just form of rule over a global empire.

Chapter III analyzes Burke's use of Roman history following the French Revolution. After 1789, his depiction of Rome grew more monstrous and sinister. The rapid deterioration of French institutions, the factional street violence, and the grasping for arbitrary power had clear precedents in the breakdown of the Late Roman Republic. The new France was "born and bred and fed in those corruptions which mark degenerated and worn-out republics."⁸ Despite the dysfunction in Paris, Revolutionary France's foreign policy possessed all of the vigor and enthusiasm of the Early Roman Republic, unleashing a total war of conquest. In his more sinister dual depiction of Rome and France, their empires emerge as haughty, bloodthirsty predators with aspirations of universal rule over Europe. This "all-conquering empire of light and reason" could only be stopped by a likewise zealous counter-revolution on the part of the "ancient, civil, moral, and political order of Europe."⁹ Christendom would, paradoxically, have to look back to the example of the Romans and the "true republican spirit" that typified the ancient warriors and statesmen.¹⁰ Thus, even as Burke summoned a corrupt Rome to understand the French Republic, the eternal city still held the keys to Europe's survival and redemption.

In exploring this neglected side of Burke, I hope to develop a more refined and thorough understanding of him not only as a political philosopher and politician but also as a thinker with a deep historical consciousness. Scholars often cast Burke as an advocate for particular and organic political traditions. Yet, his use of Roman history suggests that Burke possessed a broader view of political order that could be applied beyond only a national context. This potentially widens both the scope of Burkean thinking beyond its 18th-century and British origins.

⁸ Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 354.

⁹ Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 240. Edmund Burke, *Select Works, Vol. III*, "Second Letter on Regicide Peace" (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1999), 157.

¹⁰ Edmund Burke, *Further Reflections*, "Letter to William Eliott" (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1997), 273-274.

I. The Education of Edmund Burke

Burke's education and upbringing reflected the neoclassical age in which he lived. He attended the Quaker-affiliated Ballitore school in County Kildare, which emphasized the classical curriculum. His entrance exam to Trinity College, Dublin required him to quote and construe key passages in Virgil's *Aeneid*, a test that he passed with flying colors.¹¹ His university curriculum also focused primarily on the writings of the Greeks and Romans. As the biographer Richard Bourke details:

In their first year, as junior freshmen, students were examined in Lucian, Sallust, Homer, Virgil, Theocritus, Ovid, and Terence. Virgil and Homer were a staple in succeeding years. In addition, Juvenal, Epictetus, Justinian, and Horace constituted the core curriculum for senior freshmen. In the third year, junior sophisters studied Juvenal, Velleius, Cicero's *De officiis*, Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, and Livy. Senior sophisters, in their final year, covered Demosthenes, Aeschines, Sophocles, Suetonius, Tacitus, and Longinus on the sublime.

Even at a young age, Burke thought deeply about the meaning of his syllabus. He complained of the pedantry of Trinity's teaching methods, which obsessed over the grammatical aspects of the texts while ignoring the enduring wisdom conferred by the ancient authors. Structuring classes around the central ideas of the authors would not only expose students to the "excellent things which are wrapt up in em [sic]," but also accelerate retention of Greek and Latin.¹²

Burke's interest in the ancients did not abate throughout his life. The catalog of his library compiled after his death includes numerous works, translations, and commentaries from classical antiquity. Of the 126 verified authors in his collection, thirty-one were Greek and Roman writers. He also owned dictionaries of Greek and Latin in addition to books on the arts, drama, and archaeology of the classical era. Combined, his collection on the Greeks and Romans outnumbered his books of contemporary European literature. They only fell short of the number

¹¹ Edmund Burke, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke, Vol. I*, "Letter to Richard Shackleton, April 1744," 2.

¹² Burke, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke, Vol. I*, "Letter to Richard Shackleton, July 25th 1746," 66.

of books by English writers. Cone notes that his library was “clearly in harmony with the contemporary climate of opinion.”¹³

II. Burke’s Historical Thought

Burke’s historical thought has not attracted as much interest from scholars as his political thought. John Weston and Sora Sato constitute significant exceptions to this oversight. Weston argues that Burke, despite his status as a conservative thinker, had a well-developed idea of historical progress. Progress was gradual and accumulative, building on the achievements of a succession of past eras. It took material and economic forms through improvements in commerce and technology as well as scientific, intellectual, artistic, and literary advances. Thus, Burke was not nostalgic for the medieval “age of chivalry.”¹⁴ The eighteenth-century was, in his estimation, the most advanced and sophisticated period of human history. However, what did not progress or change were the “fundamental moral truths” of both individual ethics and politics, which remained true for all time.¹⁵

Divine Providence drives the unfolding of history through both direct and indirect means. God influences events directly through His actions and indirectly through His role as creator of human nature and the natural world. This view coexisted with an equally strong emphasis on the agency of great individuals in determining the course of events. Due to the intermeshed causation of Providence, the free will of great men, and the particular characteristics of human groups, Burke argued that it is impossible to subject history to scientific and systematic analysis. Consequently, he disavowed “organic” theories of historical development as incomplete, according to which societies grow in line with an internal logic derived from the interaction of

¹³ Carl Cone, “Edmund Burke’s Library,” 162-163, 166-167.

¹⁴ J. C. D. Clark, “Introduction,” *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 89.

¹⁵ John Weston, *Edmund Burke’s View of History*, 206-207.

their internal parts.¹⁶ Such approaches failed to take into account divine interventions in history and the contingent effects of individual agency. Since the past did not necessarily determine the future, knowledge of history, on its own, could not guide the conduct of political life.

Weston's analysis captures the complexities of Burke's historical thought. However, it fails to contextualize Burke's well-developed opinions on the particular histories of Great Britain, Europe, Asia, and North America. Sora Sato's *Edmund Burke as Historian* attempts to fill the gap. Like Weston, Sato argues that Burke viewed the forces of religion, commerce, and conquest, guided by the beneficent hand of Providence, as the essential determinants of human progress. Hence, a strong church and landed nobility constituted the benchmark of civilizational attainment. Moreover, Sato argues that Burke was also interested in how social and political orders developed in Europe and around the world. Burke's idea of order encompassed the formal political institutions of a nation and the population's general character and customs. His conception of order also included broader geopolitical and civilizational meanings. For instance, Europe did not consist of a collection of discrete national units. Instead, it possessed a particular order of interstate relations and common rules of conduct expressed in similar manners, education, and religion. The historical focus on the development of a variety of national and transnational characters and institutions directly contributed to Burke's suspicion of universalistic theories of natural rights.¹⁷

III. Ideas of Rome in Eighteenth-Century Britain

Ancient Rome held a high political and aesthetic premium in the Georgian era. Ayres demonstrates the extent to which neoclassicism enthralled British culture for most of the period.

¹⁶ Weston, *Edmund Burke's View of History*, 216-217.

¹⁷ Sora Sato, *Edmund Burke as Historian* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 217-246.

At the root of the fixation was the Whig aristocracy's need to legitimate the post-1688 constitutional settlement. Ancient Rome was viewed in marmoreal terms as an ideal republic, exhibiting public-spiritedness, martial prowess, agrarian frugality, and a deep affection for political liberty. Adopting Roman aesthetics cemented the elite's role as the guardians of freedom and balanced government, perpetually vigilant against the evils of royal prerogative and mob rule. Of course, this was more than window-dressing and false-consciousness; Roman ideals became deeply embedded in the ruling class' self-conception and modes of conduct in a way that was deeply apparent to contemporary observers. As a result, knowledge of the history and Constitution of the Roman Republic provided a key reference point to political discourse.¹⁸

However, as James Johnson and Frank Turner note, the British interaction with the ancient world was not always so self-congratulatory. While eighteenth-century Britons sought to draw out the parallels between Rome's civilization and their own, the example of the ancients could also provoke national introspection and criticism. The virtuous examples of Roman statesmen like Cato contrasted starkly with the venal practices of Georgian political life. Furthermore, thinkers in this period often criticized as well as praised the heroes of antiquity and took sides among the *optimates* and *populares* factions, which bore a vague resemblance to their own positions. Johnson also depicts a shift of emphasis in British neo-Romanism throughout the long eighteenth-century. Restoration England looked back most to the Augustan age, which had also followed a long period of civil war. After the Glorious Revolution of 1688, with the subsequent rise of the fiscal-military state, organized political parties, and financial institutions, interest shifted to the Late Republic. Soon after, the later Antonine era came into vogue as the concerns of politics turned toward improvements in commerce and imperial administration.¹⁹ By

¹⁸ Philip Ayres, *Classical Culture and the Idea of Rome in Eighteenth-Century England*, 1-47.

¹⁹ James Johnson, *The Formation of English Neoclassical Thought*, 104.

the end of the century, as Turner explains, the paradigm had exhausted itself. The French Revolution's appropriation of the Roman Republic and the subsequent Napoleonic assumption of the imperial mantle soured Britain's affections for Rome. Conservatives turned to celebrate the homegrown, Christian, and "gothic" origins of the British Constitution, while radicals looked to Ancient Greece for more democratic possibilities.²⁰

Millar downplays neo-Roman discourse in contemporary political thought. Although eighteenth-century Britons drew plausible parallels between their mixed Constitution and that of the Romans, they also recognized key differences that muted Rome's relevance. Figures like the jurist William Blackstone and the essayist Joseph Addison argued with "satisfaction" that Britain, with its hereditary monarchy, presented a more acceptable model of mixed government. With its multiple elected magistracies, Rome failed to provide a central ballast between the warring noble and popular factions. Because of this, few British political theorists at the time "put their conceptions of the Roman Republic to constructive use."²¹ However, Millar overstates his case. While most Britons, Burke included, believed that the moderns surpassed the ancients in terms of commerce, arts, and technology, they still referred to the examples of their predecessors in the realm of government. The meaning of the eighteenth-century British Constitution was hardly static or closed to debate. Thus, the model of Rome possessed immense value to political thinkers. Swift, Bolingbroke, Trenchard, Gordon, and Burke did put the Republic to constructive use. The ancient city remained the standard for discussions of mixed government and the causes of political decay, whether through factionalism, corruption, and imperialism.

²⁰ Frank Turner, "British Politics and the Demise of the Roman Republic: 1700-1939," 244-245.

²¹ Fergus Millar, *The Roman Republic in Political Thought* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002), 107-108.

Discourse on the lessons of Roman history formed two distinct schools of thought about the nature of mixed regimes. Strauman traces a “constitutionalist” tradition back to Jean Bodin, extending to Montesquieu and John Adams. The constitutionalists saw the decline of the Roman Republic originating in failures of institutional design, specifically a lack of formal separations of power, which cleared the way for military despotism. This view opposed the “classical republicans” who pointed to imperial conquests leading to a corrosive flood of “corruption, luxury, and vice” and a resulting deficit of civic virtue needed to sustain free government. Once the citizenry failed to exercise the military and political duties on which republican government depended, the rule of the emperors naturally followed. The constitutionalist tradition negated the role of virtue in republican government.²² Strauman does not place Burke in either camp. However, it is nonetheless important to use Strauman’s distinction in analyzing Burke’s thought on the Roman Republic.

IV. Burke’s Idea of Rome

Only a handful of works have attempted to address Burke’s relationship with the Romans. Among these, the main disagreement lies in the depth of this engagement. Sachs takes a somewhat limited view of Burke’s interaction with the Roman legacy. He argues that Burke’s references to classical texts, both historical and poetic, is primarily tactical—a means of in-group signaling to the British landowning classes whom he wanted to mobilize against the French Revolution and its sympathizers in Britain. In other words, Burke “deploys Roman satire to consolidate a consensus among the governing elite and to position himself within it.” For instance, Burke’s multiple references to Cicero cast himself as a latter-day Roman statesman

²² Benjamin Strauman, *Crisis and Constitutionalism: Roman Political Thought from the Fall of the Republic to the Age of Revolutions* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 303-341.

defending ancient institutions against radicals at home and abroad.²³ Sachs eventually admits that Burke's use of Roman history and Latin literature is ultimately "crucial" to his defense of the Church of England, prescription, and private property.²⁴ However, he grants far more importance to Burke's instrumentalization of ancient authors. Furthermore, Sachs neglects Burke's quotations of the classics throughout his other writings, which he composed in entirely different political circumstances than the *Reflections*, thereby limiting the impact of his analysis on his thought as a whole.

Sachs also draws attention to the implicit tension between the classical heritage and the conservative mode of thought that emphasized the preeminence of particular organic traditions and Christianity over rationalistic and universalist axioms. Burke's own logic, "Ancient history can no longer be the teacher of life" since "the only precedents that matter are national ones."²⁵ Sachs cites Turner, who argues along similar lines that the "intense religiosity" of Burke's thought undermined "the concept of politics as a realm of secular human activity that could be profitably illustrated through the model of the pagan republic."²⁶ Thus, despite his use of the Roman paradigm, Burke unwittingly contributed to its marginalization within British politics. While Roman glory became less relevant in British political discourse after Burke, these claims misinterpret his views of the nature of prescription and national tradition. For instance, Burke and many of his contemporaries viewed Rome as a profoundly religious society even if they had no knowledge of or did not accept Christianity. Thus, the idea of Rome as a historical example of "secular politics" was contested at the time. Furthermore, Burke used Roman vignettes and symbolism to advance his claims about the British Constitution. Rome still retained significance

²³ Jonathan Sachs, *Romantic Antiquity: Rome in the British Imagination, 1789-1832* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 57.

²⁴ Sachs, *Romantic Antiquity*, 60.

²⁵ Sachs, *Romantic Antiquity*, 64-65.

²⁶ Turner, "British Politics and the Demise of the Roman Republic: 1700-1939," 244-245.

as a source of analogy. As he admitted, the study of the ancient commonwealths informed his view of politics at large.

J. C. D. Clark, Thomas Chaimowicz, and Sora Sato all suggest a deeper, more sophisticated relationship between Burke and Ancient Rome. However, they do not follow through with a complete analysis incorporating the whole of Burke's writings. In his introduction to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, J. C. D. Clark argues that Burke's thought must be understood within the context of eighteenth-century Whig political theory as opposed to any other ideology that other scholars anachronistically associate with Burke such as conservatism, natural law theory, utilitarianism, romanticism, etc. One facet of the Whig worldview was its use of Roman history and literature as a reference point and source of literary analogy. Accordingly, Clark avers that instead of viewing Burke in the light of nineteenth-century organicism or Darwinism, one must recognize his "retro-Virgilian" outlook on human society. This emphasizes the importance of "a dignified, duty-bound, ancestral social order" underpinned by an inter-generational or eternal compact. The history of classical antiquity was a valuable source of knowledge of politics and "ranked with precedents, charters, and acts of Parliament as a source of venerable but immediately present authority."²⁷ Clark also catalogs and contextualizes Burke's references and allusions to Roman authors like Cicero, Virgil, Livy, Suetonius, Terence, Juvenal, and others. However, he does not attempt to characterize Burke's relationship to Rome outside of the *Reflections*. As such, his analysis is limited since he does not consider Burke's works in their entirety.

Chaimowicz makes a broader claim based on a wider reading of Burke that his thought "can only be understood if the Roman components of his thinking are taken into

²⁷ J. C. D. Clark, "Introduction," *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 94

consideration.”²⁸ Burke’s education and lifelong interest in the classics confirm him as a member of the natural law tradition. Burke’s rejection of legal positivism and his invocations of the “eternal and immutable law, in which will and reason are the same” recall the Ciceronian definition of natural law as “right reason, which is congruent with nature.”²⁹ The “great primeval contract of eternal society,” a partnership binding the living, the dead, and the unborn, was also indebted to Cicero’s idea of *virtus*. Tacitus’ depiction of the Roman Empire justifies Burke’s common-law view of the British Constitution as a product of time immemorial, developing slowly over the centuries and never losing its internal balance. However, Chaimowicz makes sure to point out Burke’s “independence and genius” who “grasped ideas from former times and reproduced them in his own way, providing them, in the process, with additional nuances which often reveal themselves more to linguistic instinct than exact analysis.”³⁰ Despite his insights, Chaimowicz overlooks other aspects of Burke’s “Roman mind,” particularly its influence on his theories of political partisanship, imperialism, and the French Revolution. As in the case of Sachs and Clark, his oversight stems from an incomplete survey of the Burkean corpus.

Sora Sato’s *Edmund Burke as Historian* considers Burke’s view of Roman history and its legacy for European civilization. In doing so, he pulls from a broader selection of works. Some of these had only recently been attributed to Burke and were therefore previously unavailable to Burke scholars. Sato rightly emphasizes Burke’s classical education, particularly his interaction with the Roman historian Sallust, whom Burke criticized. Sallust asserted a version of Great Man Theory, which attributed historical development to the acts of a few exceptional individuals. Burke disagreed and placed the onus of historical development on national character, manners,

²⁸ Thomas Chaimowicz, *Antiquity as the Source of Modernity* (New Brunswick, ME: Transaction Publishers, 2008), 89.

²⁹ Chaimowicz, *Antiquity as the Source of Modernity*, 84.

³⁰ Chaimowicz, *Antiquity as the Source of Modernity*, 80-89

and mores. Without suitable national characters, great states and empires could not develop successfully even if they were equipped with the most noteworthy leaders.³¹

It was the spirit of the Roman people and their particular institutions that set the Romans apart from the Greeks and other ancient peoples, whose politics tended toward either despotism or anarchy.³² Nonetheless, the weight of Burke's thoughts on Rome tends toward discussion of the Empire rather than the Republic. His view of the former was fairly balanced, acknowledging both the benign and rapacious forces at work in imperialism. The Romans were "the legislators of mankind," bringing law, arts, and sciences to a barbaric Europe. Alternatively, Burke argued that the Empire's fall was a consequence of excessive taxation, corruption, mismanagement of the provincial governments, and geographical over-extension. These causes were politically relevant to Burke since he believed they presaged the demise of Britain's dominions as well. Overall, Sato asserts that Burke's views were essentially "familiar" to eighteenth-century British public discourse.³³ Sato neglects Burke's writings discussing the Roman Republic. While these are less lengthy than his thoughts on the Empire, they were still incredibly relevant in informing Burke's views of the British Constitution. In addition, due to the broad scope of his book, Sato's treatment of Burke's imperial thought is rather brisk and requires more thorough examination.

³¹ Sato, *Edmund Burke as Historian*, 1-20.

³² Sato, *Edmund Burke as Historian*, 83.

³³ Sato, *Edmund Burke as Historian*, 88.

CHAPTER I:

“That Famous Constitution”: Burke and the Roman Republic

In the aftermath of the publication of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in 1790, Burke attracted tremendous opprobrium. It provoked not only radicals but also many Whig colleagues in Parliament who believed that the French Revolution had put itself on the pathway toward constitutional monarchy. They accused Burke of resurrecting the Tory doctrine of the divine right of kings and other Stuart absurdities. His argument in defense of the British Constitution as a product of the wisdom of accumulated centuries implicitly questioned the legitimacy of “all republics antient and modern [sic].” Burke felt particularly compelled to respond to this particular line of criticism in *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*. He denied that he had “professed himself a friend or an enemy to republics or to monarchies in the abstract.” Since constitutions were products of history and developed according to the specific character of the people they governed, Burke could hardly condemn republican government without reference to their particular history and institutional development and leave the very “science of government” incomplete. Burke himself claimed to have “studied the form and spirit

of republics [from] very early in life...with great attention; and with a mind undisturbed by affection or prejudice.”³⁴

Surveying Burke’s career, it is difficult to disagree with his self-assessment. Though he did not write a complete history of the Republic, multiple references to its various institutions and practices appear throughout his writings, particularly in ways that overlap with his understanding of the fundamental principles of British constitutionalism. In fact, he often equated the component parts of British government with their republican counterparts. William Pitt the Younger could be described as a latter-day praetor. The duties of the Church of England resembled the stern offices of the censorship. The debates of the Houses of Commons and Lords echoed the rhetorical majesty of the Senate, and so on. While Burke sometimes idealized his depiction of the Republic, he also engaged critically with it, earnestly seeking to explain its political success. Its strength and resilience originated in the character of the people, perfected by a sturdy devotion to their ancestors, families, and the gods. Far from detracting allegiance to the state, the spirit of piety nourished Roman commitment to its institutions. As long as the spirit survived, so did the commonwealth. This sentiment accords well with Burke’s chosen method of analyzing history through the development and preservation of shared national traits and institutions.

Classical republicanism emphasized the necessity of traditional virtues in preserving mixed constitutions. Politicians, thinkers, and polemicists endlessly evoked variations along this theme throughout the eighteenth-century. Many feared that just as in Rome, the growth of financial power, national debt, luxury, imperial conquests, and standing armies would sap free British institutions and construct a terrifying military despotism. However, what sets Burke apart

³⁴ Edmund Burke, *Further Reflections on the Revolution in France*, “An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs,” (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1997), 114.

from the standard view is his deeper analysis of republican institutions, which overlaps with his trademark theories of the social contract, the importance of national character in shaping institutions, the necessity of established religion, and the corporate spirit of free constitutions.

I. National Character

At the heart of Burke's understanding of the Roman Republic is its national character—the shared traits and customs of the Roman people that motivated their actions and constituted their identity. What comprised this Roman national character? Loyalty and piety or *pietas* permeated every institution of Roman Society.³⁵ Taking aim at Sallust's portrayal of Roman history as determined by the “the Virtues & Capacity of particular men,” Burke instead placed the animus on the “Genius & Character of the Roman People.” It was their collective virtues that provided for continuous military victories over the span of many generations. Though Rome did not lack great generals, it was the martial spirit of the populace that sustained their exploits over many centuries marked by triumphant military victories.³⁶ Burke indicated that this aspect of *Romanitas* was the most durable, noting that “the Roman people, however degenerate, still retained much of their martial spirit” even under the rule of the Emperors.³⁷

Before the descent to decadence, the Roman character exemplified Burke's theory of the “great primaeval contract of eternal society.” This obligated “a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.”³⁸ Burke's use of what J. C. D. Clark calls “retro-Virgilian” imagery creates an idealized portrait of Rome as a “dignified, duty-bound, ancestral social order.”³⁹ Discussing the succession

³⁵ See Gertrude Emilie. "Cicero and the Roman Pietas." *The Classical Journal* 39, no. 9 (1944): 536-42.

³⁶ Edmund Burke, *Party, Parliament, and Conquest in Newly Ascribed Burke Manuscripts*, “National Character and Parliament,” edited by Richard Bourke, 641.

³⁷ Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 190.

³⁸ Burke, *Reflections*, 261.

³⁹ J. C. D. Clarke, “Introduction,” *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 93.

of the British Crown—1688 and 1715 notwithstanding—Burke quotes a passage from Virgil's *Georgics* that describes the society of the beehive. Although individual members live and die in short periods of time, "the race abides immortal." The tightly imbricated sequence of generations secures "the fortune of the house, and grandsires' grandsires are numbered on the roll."⁴⁰ Burke returns to Virgilian idyll when he described the English sympathizers of the French Revolution as "loud and troublesome, insects of the hour" who "make the field ring with their importunate chink." The vast majority of Britons, however, Burke describes as contented cattle "reposed beneath the shadow of the British oak" who "chew the cud and are silent."⁴¹ British and Roman society blur together in arcadian imagery depicting tranquil social relations defined by attachment to place and ancestry. This did not entail an obsession with the past but rather a greater care for the future. As Burke quipped, "People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors."⁴²

Roman family structures, animated by the same inter-generational spirit, were implacably solid. Burke noted that "whilst Rome was in its integrity, the few causes allowed for divorce amounted in effect to a prohibition...accordingly some hundreds of years passed, without a single example of that kind."⁴³ One instance of Roman filial piety drove Burke to embellish the relationship between Great Britain and her American colonies. America's grain exports to Britain constituted "true filial piety." With "Roman charity," America had "put the full breast of its youthful exuberance to the mouth of its exhausted parent."⁴⁴ Burke's imagery of intergenerational nursing derives from a morality tale reported in Valerius Maximus in which a Roman daughter breastfed her imprisoned father, who might otherwise have starved to death.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Burke, *Reflections*, 171-2.

⁴¹ Burke, *Reflections*, 248.

⁴² Burke, *Reflections*, 184.

⁴³ Burke, *Select Works Vol. III*, "First Letter on Regicide Peace," 129.

⁴⁴ Burke, *Select Works, Vol. I*, "Speech on Moving Resolutions on Conciliation with the Colonies," 234.

⁴⁵ Valerius Maximus, *Noble Doings and Sayings*, Book V, 5.4.7.

Undergirding the ancestral social compact was Rome's pious devotion to the *pax deorum*. Despite their ignorance of Christian revelation, the Romans were rigorously obedient to the will of the gods, unlike the free-thinking Greeks. As the historian, Edward Wortley-Montagu, whose work Burke was familiar with, put it, "We read of no heathen nation in the world, where both the publick and private duties of religion were so strictly adhered to, and so scrupulously observed as among the Romans [sic]."⁴⁶ Burke agreed with this assessment. Willful ignorance of the divine order descended the great scale, dissolving lesser bonds and even hope for future generations. He concluded, "I cannot conceive how a man's not believing in God can teach him to cultivate the earth with the least of any additional skill or encouragement. "*Diis immortalibus sero,*" said an old Roman, when he held one handle of the plough, whilst Death held the other."⁴⁷ The whole passage quoted from Cicero's *De Senectute* reads: "And if you ask a farmer, however old, for whom he is planting, he will unhesitatingly reply, 'For the immortal gods, who have willed not only that I should receive these blessings from my ancestors, but also that I should hand them on to posterity.'"⁴⁸ Worship of the gods sustained and replenished the ties of ancestry while securing the divine favor for the prosperity of Rome's descendants.

Outside of the home and hearth, Roman religion was also the fundamental basis of the laws and civil society. Burke had asserted in his partial history of England how "The first openings of civility have been everywhere made by religion." Roman history afforded an example of this; the high priests or pontiffs had been the keepers and interpreters of the city's legal codes during the Republic's early years.⁴⁹ Moreover, Cicero's defense of established

⁴⁶ Edward Montagu, *Reflections on the Rise and Fall of the Ancient Republics* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2015) 193.

⁴⁷ Burke, *Reflections*, 361.

⁴⁸ Cicero, *De Senectute*, Book VII, 25.

⁴⁹ Burke, "An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History," 176.

religion inspired Burke's own vindication of the Church of England, which he quoted at length in the *Reflections*.

So in the very beginning we must persuade our citizens that the gods are the lords and rulers of all things, and that what is done, is done by their authority, that they are likewise great benefactors of man, observing the character of every individual, what he does, of what wrong he is guilty, and with what intentions and with what piety he fulfills his religious duties, and they take note of the pious and the impious. For surely minds which are imbued with such ideas will not fail to form true and useful opinions.⁵⁰

The public acknowledgment of the existence of a divine order tempered both the rulers and the people, making them aware of the higher authorities who remember right and wrong.

Though Burke praised the civilizing aspects of Roman *pietas*, his admiration did not overwhelm his broad-church Anglican sensibilities. Greco-Roman depictions of the gods in human form he described as "coarse and vulgar" forms of idolatry that failed to recognize the "uncreated and imperishable" nature of true divinity. Even the Celtic Druids who had thrived before the Roman invasion of Britain had the spiritual sense to worship "a Being eternal and infinite" instead of ersatz anthropomorphic deities.⁵¹ Roman errors in theology attended errors in practice, particularly their harsh persecution of alien religious sects. Correcting a fellow member of Parliament who had "praised the tolerating spirit of the heathens" during the debate on the Bill for the Relief of Dissenters, Burke described the bigotry of Roman religious persecution. As polytheists, the Romans tolerated other polytheists because their shared belief in the existence of multiple gods did not clash with one another. Yet, they could never apply the same liberality to monotheists whose theological claims contradicted the whole "constitution" of the "polytheistic establishment." Accordingly, the Roman pagans "constantly carried on persecution against that doctrine." The senatorial statutes, described by Livy, "against the introduction of any foreign rites in matters of religion," confirmed this fact. To make matters worse, the Romans were far

⁵⁰ Cicero, *De Legibus*, Book II, vii.

⁵¹ Burke, "An Abridgment," 182.

too lenient toward the atheist Epicureans, whose pervasive skepticism corroded the ligaments of traditional *pietas* from within. The Epicureans “defied all subscription; they defied all sorts of conformity; there was no subscription to which they were not ready to set their hands, no ceremonies they refused to practise; they made it a principle of their irreligion outwardly to conform to any religion [sic].” The misplaced severity of Roman religious laws allowed “those great dangerous animals to escape notice,” while “entangl[ing] the poor fluttering silken wings of a tender conscience.”⁵²

Roman values—martial, domestic, and religious—were inseparable from their success as a civilization. Burke might object to parts of their content, particularly their polytheism and persecution. However, it was undeniable that the Roman character was essentially cohesion-generating. They lived their lives in a unique communion with their ancestors and their descendants. As Burke later argued, this intrinsic embeddedness extended to Roman political institutions as well.

II. Corporate Spirit

The maintenance of traditional Roman virtues was necessary to sustain Rome’s long-standing Constitution. This was no matter of antiquarian interest for Burke. British commentators frequently drew parallels between Roman politics and their own, emphasizing the mutual dependence of public virtue and political liberty. The shared rule of the one, the few, and the many in the form of the consuls, the Senate, and the popular assemblies resembled Britain’s mixed regime composed of Crown, Lords, and Commons. Burke was no exception and frequently drew from the annals of the Republic to strengthen his arguments. And yet, his invocation of Roman history reveals Burke’s own nuanced and expanded conception of how the

⁵² Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol. II*, “Speech on Toleration Bill,” 385.

Roman Republic functioned, going beyond contemporary tropes. Instead of relying solely on stale theories of the mixed constitution, Burke called attention to the corporate spirit that animated the regime.

The associative tendency manifested itself in the political parties that Burke believed to have proliferated during the Republic. In *Thoughts on the Causes of Present Discontents*, Burke argued for the necessity and respectability, in Mansfield's terms, of party government. The term "party" denoted a group of politicians united by shared principles in pursuit of the national interest. This view contrasted with the traditional idea of party. Acting as a faction supposedly diminished commitment to the common good. Partisanship either constituted a threat to free government or the last resort for statesmen acting under emergency conditions.⁵³ The operation of the Republic provided a historical example that legitimized Burke's claim. Between the colleges of elected magistrates, "the holding of offices together, the disposition of which arose from chance, not selection, gave rise to a relation which continued for life. It was called *necessitudo sortis*; and it was looked upon with a sacred reverence."⁵⁴ Translated, the *necessitudo sortis* is "the loyalty imposed by the lot" invoked by Cicero during his prosecution of the provincial governor of Sicily, Gaius Verres.⁵⁵ When he was quaestor under the Consul Gnaeus Papirius Carbo during Sulla's Second Civil War, Verres switched sides from the Marian faction to the Sullan, taking with him the consul's treasury. His betrayal violated the loyalty owed from a subordinate to a superior magistrate determined by lot or senatorial direction. Since Roman magistrates were elected separately rather than appointed, this rule was essential to the cohesion of the Republic. As Cicero explained:

⁵³ Harvey Mansfield, *Statesmanship and Party Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 157-183.

⁵⁴ Burke, *Select Works, Vol. I*, "Thoughts on the Causes of Present Discontents," 140.

⁵⁵ Cicero, *Verrine Orations*, Book II, i, 37. For Burke's view of how this principle could be corrupted in the context of imperial governance, see Chapter 2.

The fact is that if we are prepared to reduce all these principles to chaos and confusion, we shall fill life with danger and resentment and hostility at every turn—if the decisions of the lot are to lose all their sanctity, if men are not to feel bound to one another by sharing in good or bad fortune, if we are not to respect the customs and traditions of our fathers. That man must be everyone's personal enemy who has behaved like a public enemy to his own friends.⁵⁶

However, there are crucial differences between the Roman *sortis* and the theory of party that Burke proposed. As Mansfield notes, the *sortis* was determined by lot rather than “selection.”⁵⁷ Thus, the Roman magistrates were not primarily united by shared principles to advance the interest of the commonwealth but rather a hierarchical loyalty pledge to the consuls. However, Burke also notes that the Romans valued the principle of “*Idem sentire de republica*” (“a common feeling as to the affairs of State”) highly, implying that an agreement on principles was at least implicit in the arrangement.⁵⁸ Despite the differences, the Roman example provided Burke with a model for the enduring strength of unity that ought to exist between statesmen without regard to mere expediency. Even if the source of union was different, politicians with shared principles should avoid Verres' example as scrupulously as possible. Failure to do so would instill a spirit of distrust in British politics that would impair the cohesion of Parliament and its independence from the royal court.

In the same passage, Burke also claimed that the constitution “distributed [the people] into political societies, in which they acted in support of such interests in the State as they severally affected. For it was then thought no crime, to endeavour by every honest means to advance to superiority and power those of your own sentiments and opinions.”⁵⁹ By “political societies” Burke meant the legislative assemblies of the Roman people, which were organized according to neighborhood (*Comitia Tributa*), property ownership (*Comitia Centuriata*), or membership in the plebeian class (*Concilium Plebis*). Thus, Rome's political process depended

⁵⁶ Cicero, *Verrine Orations*, Book II, i, 38.

⁵⁷ Mansfield, *Statesmanship and Party Government*, 182.

⁵⁸ Cicero, *De Amicitia*, Chapter XXVII.

⁵⁹ Burke, “Thoughts on the Causes of Present Discontents,” 140.

on the deliberation of a variety of corporate groups. The Romans placed immense responsibility upon these connections. Like the *sortis*, it was considered shameful to abandon the interests of one's corporate group for individual advantage. This did not present potential for division or gridlock, in which citizens ignored the needs of the commonwealth for those of their own subdivision. Rather the corporatist arrangement cultivated "honorable" and "virtuous" habits among citizens. The "private honor" bound in friendship in this way buttressed "public trust" since "he who, in the common intercourse of life, showed he regarded somebody besides himself, when he came to act in a public situation, might probably consult some other interest than his own."⁶⁰ Burke anticipated his more famous observation in the *Reflections* about the source of "public affections" residing in the attachment to the "little platoons" of class and estate. Corporate groups within society constitute "the first link in the series by which we proceed toward a love to our country and to mankind."⁶¹ Instead of fomenting factionalism, corporate groupings prepared citizens to participate in it with an outlook toward a common good. It was for this reason that the British Constitution ensured the representation of the Lords and Commons in separate chambers. In doing so, it "preserve[d] an unity in so great a diversity of its parts."^{62,63}

Burke expanded on this principle toward the end of the *Reflections* when he criticized the French Constitution for its simple, unicameral nature. Their "futile scheme of polity" failed to recognize the various estates, classes, and other divisions of French society. This contrasted starkly with the British Constitution and the "great legislators of antiquity," among whom Burke included Greek lawgivers like Solon and the legendary Roman kings, Numa Pompilius and Servius Tullius. These legislators understood the inherent duality of human nature in its natural

⁶⁰ Burke, "Thoughts on the Causes of Present Discontents," 140.

⁶¹ Burke, *Reflections*, 202.

⁶² Burke, *Reflections*, 184.

⁶³ See Peter Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 213-217.

and civil forms. They considered human nature not in the abstract or within a state of nature but within society and in contact with a diverse range of individuals and social organizations. These two natures mix and compound within the human person, negating schemes of government that only account for one aspect of human nature. From this heterogeneous self “arose many diversities amongst men, according to their birth, their education, their professions, the periods of their lives, their residence in towns or in the country, their several ways of acquiring and of fixing property, and according to the quality of the property itself—all which rendered them as it were so many different species of animals.” Burke compared the prudent legislator to a “husbandman” who is well aware of the nature and functions of his “sheep, horses, and oxen,” and accordingly does not “abstract and equalize them all into animals, without providing for each kind an appropriate food, care, and employment...” The modern legislator, however, “was resolved to know nothing of his flocks,” considering humankind to be an undifferentiated mass of atomistic units all equally suited for a simple democratic constitution.⁶⁴

Consequently, constitutional inquiries could only begin with understanding the variety of human persons. The ancient legislators accounted for and formally expressed these differences through the fundamental laws and institutions of their commonwealths. Accordingly, they “dispose[d] their citizens into such classes, and to place[d] them in such situations in the state, as their peculiar habits might qualify them to fill...” Depending on their stations, certain groups were “appropriated privileges as might secure to them what their specific occasions required.” The weight of such privileges shielded each estate from the “conflict caused by the diversity of interests that must exist and must contend in all complex society.”⁶⁵ In all, human nature required a constitution that embraced the variety of its forms. The legislator did not impose a

⁶⁴ Burke, *Reflections*, 357-358.

⁶⁵ Burke, *Reflections*, 358-359.

preconceived view of political life on the people. Still, he recognized pre-political organizations and formalized their representation within a constitutional system that guaranteed their rights.

Here, Burke seems to have drawn on the insights of Montesquieu and William Blackstone. Montesquieu, whom he cited later in the passage, accepted “the division of those who have a right of suffrage” into classes as “a fundamental law in republics.”⁶⁶ Such had been the case in Athens and Rome. In his explanation of the law of corporations, William Blackstone credited Numa Pompilius, the second King of Rome, with instituting guilds and trade associations among the Roman people. In doing so, he quelled tribal rivalries between the Sabines and the Quirites.⁶⁷ Burke, an avid reader of Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, may have been thinking of this passage when he wrote since he compares the French legislators unfavorably with Numa soon after.⁶⁸

The corporate bodies that Burke had in mind appear to include both formal institutions and more informal groupings. The various popular assemblies organized the populace along several key social dimensions. For instance, the *Comitia Centuriata* segmented the people according to their property holdings and martial ability, augmenting the political weight of the patricians.⁶⁹ The *Comitia Tributa*, which allotted more votes to the rural vicinities outside of the city at the expense of the tumultuous urban-dwellers, kept the “landed interest” fused with the state, allowing them “to lead, and direct, and moderate all the rest.”⁷⁰ Burke believed the same force was at work in the House of Lords, where the “sluggish, inert and timid” mindset of hereditary property balanced the more ambitious, mobile, and active instincts of the House of Commons.⁷¹ The Senate, representing the high aristocracy, former magistrates, and priests,

⁶⁶ See Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Book II, Ch. 2.

⁶⁷ William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 456-457.

⁶⁸ Burke, *Reflections*, 358.

⁶⁹ Burke, *Reflections*, 418.

⁷⁰ Burke, *Select Works*, Vol. III, “Fourth Letter on Regicide Peace,” 414.

⁷¹ Burke, *Reflections*, 206-208.

performed a similar constraining function. The august body “preserved something like consistency in the proceedings of state.” This made it ideal for the conduct of foreign affairs and other duties that required long-term, strategic deliberation and execution. Burke went so far as to say that the Senate constituted “the very essence of a republican government,” acting as an intermediary between the collective power of the people and the unitary power of the “mere executive.” Consequently, the Senate prevented the Constitution from degenerating into a simple form.⁷²

Rome provided a clear example of a political system that could effectively manage a people grouped into a diverse assemblage of sub-communities and interests. Loyalty to the Republic was not opposed to but rather mediated through attachment to magisterial colleges, extended kinship groups, local neighborhoods, social classes, popular assemblies, and professional associations. At the same time, these institutions supported the hierarchical orders within the state, particularly the landowning members of the patrician and senatorial classes. Yet, the powers reserved for the higher orders necessarily opened avenues for constitutional instability in the form of a ruthless oligarchy.

III. The Conflict of the Orders

Burke’s attitude toward the patrician governing class of the Republic resembled his ambivalent view of the aristocracy at large. On the one hand, aristocracy is an essential political institution without which “no great Commonwealth could by any possibility long subsist.”⁷³ Rome’s military triumphs during the Republic owed to the governance of “a most wise order of men, perfected by a traditionary experience in the policy of conquest.” The instinctual cunning

⁷² Burke, *Reflections*, 367-368.

⁷³ Burke, *Further Reflections*, “Letter to a Noble Lord,” 322.

and cohesion of the patrician class allowed them to draw “some advantage from every turn of fortune” and persevere “in one uniform and comprehensive plan of breaking to pieces everything which endangered their safety or obstructed their greatness.”⁷⁴ Burke’s depiction strongly resembles his later portrait of the British aristocracy, who “form[ed] the chain that connect[ed] the ages of the nation.” In doing so, their example and privilege did not act as “an excuse for inglorious sloth, but as an incitement to virtuous activity.” A true nobleman sees within himself both the summation of the glories of past ages and the possibilities of future ones.⁷⁵ Burke directly compared the British aristocratic families to the Claudian and Valerian houses whose “personal Characters, dispositions, and traditionary politicks [sic]” kept the all-important “ballance of that famous constitution [sic].”⁷⁶ In both Rome and Britain, the aristocracy performed the crucial role of strengthening links to past generations. In furthering this defense of noble orders within the state, Burke directly appropriated Cicero’s defense of noble orders in *Pro Sestio*.

All we who are good citizens always favour noble birth, both because it is good for the state that there should be noblemen worthy of their ancestors, and because the memory of distinguished men and of those who deserved well of the state lives in our hearts even after they are dead.⁷⁷

On the other hand, untempered by institutions representing the people, aristocratic rule would quickly debase itself into “an austere and insolent domination.”⁷⁸ Commenting on the temperament of the Southern planter class in the American colonies, Burke analogized them to the aristocracies of the “ancient commonwealths,” a designation that certainly did not exclude Rome’s patrician class. They possessed a well-defined, exclusive, and “haughty” idea of liberty based on “rank and privilege” and the subordination of others. While the ideal implied higher

⁷⁴ Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 162.

⁷⁵ Burke, “Letter to a Noble Lord,” 322.

⁷⁶ Burke, *Correspondence Vol. II*, “Letter to the Duke of Richmond,” 377.

⁷⁷ Cicero, *Pro Sestio*, Book IX, 21.

⁷⁸ Burke, “Thoughts on the Causes of Present Discontents,” 89.

expectations for character than more egalitarian states, Burke conceded that the ancient elites possessed “at least as much pride as virtue.” But, the compound of “haughtiness of domination” and “the spirit of freedom” once mixed proved unalterable by simple legislation.⁷⁹

For these reasons, “The pride of the Roman nobility deserved a check,” though this would be no reason to “admire the conduct of Cinna, and Marius, and Saturninus.” These despicable figures extorted property and purged the elite of their political enemies.⁸⁰ However, since Burke emphasized the corporate and elitist nature of republican institutions, it is unclear what constitutional safeguards should have protected the plebs from the austerity and insolence of the patricians. Burke, perhaps inspired by the Machiavellian account of the necessary tumult in free states, credited the “contention” that existed between the nobility and the plebeians with “preserv[ing] the vigour of their constitution.” Constitutional balance disintegrated once one party gained a permanent advantage over the other.⁸¹ The virtue of the nobility lay in their traditional instinct for glory and public service. The virtue of the people consisted in their willingness to counteract this impulse when it grew overbearing and tyrannical.

In the same way, Burke was no less willing to criticize the plebeians than he was the patricians. If an unrestrained aristocracy was arrogant and domineering, a popular democracy could prove fickle, destabilizing, and unworthy of rule. In *Thoughts* Burke urged his fellow MPs to remember Tacitus’ maxim: *Breves et infaustos populi Romani amores* (“Brief and ill-omened are the affections of the Roman people”).⁸² The democracies of the ancient world tended either toward majoritarian tyranny or anarchy. The arbitrary and irresolute nature of the Athenian Assembly “broke the tenor and consistency of the laws,” shedding its authority as a sovereign.

⁷⁹ Burke, “Speech on Moving Resolutions on Conciliation with the Colonies,” 181-182.

⁸⁰ Burke, *Further Reflections*, “Letter to Charles-Jean-Francois Depont,” 14.

⁸¹ Burke, *Party, Parliament, and Conquest in Newly Ascribed Burke Manuscripts*, “On Parties,” edited by Richard Bourke, 646.

⁸² Burke, *Select Works, Vol. I*, “Thoughts on the Causes of Present Discontents,” 126.

Citing Aristotle, Burke acknowledged that democracies could also exert far greater oppression on minority groups than they might suffer “from the dominion of a single scepter.”⁸³ Considering this, Burke’s view of the plebeians of Rome likely did not stray too far from that of the *demos* of Athens.

As both classes simultaneously attained their corrupted forms, the Republic’s fate was sealed. The governing class grew oligarchic and disconnected from their impoverished fellow citizens, who began to take on the traits of a mob. What set apart the Late Republic from preceding eras was that “Rome now contained many citizens of immense wealth, eloquence, and ability. Particular men were more considered than the Republic; and the fortune and genius of the Roman people.”⁸⁴ As far as the mass of the people were concerned, “the frequency and charge of elections, and the monstrous expense of an unremitted courtship to the people” had brought about an orgy of factionalism, bribery, and debauchery.⁸⁵ These views on the demise of the Republic were fairly conventional by eighteenth-century historiographical standards. Burke recognized that although this period was certainly not “the best time for morals,” it was “the wisest and best time of the commonwealth”... “best for its knowledge how to correct evil government.”⁸⁶ In other words, the Republic’s death throes produced the most sophisticated thought on government (in the form of the works of Cicero, Livy, and Sallust) even if the morals that had sustained it were dissipating into the Tiber.

IV. The Emperors

⁸³ Burke, *Reflections*, 291-293.

⁸⁴ Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 163-164.

⁸⁵ Burke, *Writings and Speeches*, Vol. III, “Speech on the Duration of Parliaments,” 596.

⁸⁶ Burke, *Writings and Speeches* Vol VII, “Speech on the Sixth Article,” 36.

With the advent of the Principate, Rome's Constitution was drawn to another extreme: the tyranny of a single ruler. Burke's views on the emperors are less developed than those of the Republic. Nevertheless, they still show serious thought on the nature of tyranny in the same style of Tacitus and Suetonius. The Imperial period is marked by a decline in the strength of its moderating institutions, like the Senate and Rome's moral character. Similarly, the steady corporate spirit that had animated the Republic had vanished to be replaced with the radical contingency and caprice of despotism. Burke emphasized how imperial policies varied greatly depending on the specific personality of the emperors. Augustus' caution and desire to establish personal rule prevented military expansion to the British Isles. Tiberius' sullen nature and wariness of potential competitors also kept the legions barracked on the continent. Caligula's signature mix of extravagance and insanity led him to conduct a mock invasion of Britain after which, "adding ridicule to disgrace," his soldiers returned to Rome loaded with seashells to commemorate their victory over Neptune.⁸⁷

Like many of his contemporaries, Burke admired the "great" emperors of the Antonine Age, such as Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, who were widely recognized as paragons of virtue, justice, and administrative competence. Though they governed as absolute monarchs, Burke claimed their status did not render them immune to sympathy. He "could not rejoice at the[ir] sufferings" in the same way that he might for Nero's undignified condemnation from the Senate and his subsequent suicide.⁸⁸ Thus, the punishment for tyranny depended on the nature of the tyrant. But, even this is hardly a ringing endorsement for a system defined by dependence on the whim of the reigning prince.

⁸⁷ Burke, "An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History," 189-190.

⁸⁸ Burke, "An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs," 90.

Some structural political factors remained in spite of the despotism. The only vestige of the high old Roman virtues that withstood the Republic's collapse was the warlike spirit of the people. However, this feature intensified the corruption of Roman politics. Drawing on Tacitus' account of the Praetorian Guard under the early emperors, Burke argued that the emperors cultivated "the affection of the soldiery" to maintain their power. This "often obliged [them] to such enterprises as might prove them no improper heads of a military constitution." Under pressure, Emperor Claudius decided to invade Britain in AD 43. The emperor calculated that a victory would elevate his prestige at home, while a defeat in a "remote and little known" corner of the world would not trigger revolts or external invasions.⁸⁹ The traditional Roman virtues—piety, a warlike prowess, and *esprit de corps*—had either dissolved or morphed beyond recognition. The advent of imperial rule, in other words, irrevocably altered the traditional national character in such a way that even former virtues were transmuted into vices.

Peering behind the pomp and excess of the Principate, Burke detected a leveling spirit at work as well. "Elevated above all the rest of mankind" the emperors "look[ed] upon all their subjects as on a level." The rule of the patrician nobility, which provided the ballast of the Republic, quickly dissolved with the accession of Augustus. Those raised to supreme power despised the old aristocracy "on account of the occasional resistance to their will, which will be made by their virtue, their petulance, or their pride." Obversely, emperors tend to associate themselves with "low company," including "flatterers, tale-bearers, parasites, pimps, and buffoons." Aristocrats, of course, could play the fawning courtier if necessary, although their "education, and early habits, and some lurking remains of their dignity" prevented them from effectively competing in the base realm of court politics.⁹⁰ Similarly, the emperors held even

⁸⁹ Burke, "An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History," 190-191.

⁹⁰ Burke, *Writings and Speeches, Vol. III*, "Speech on Economical Reform 11 February 1780," 532.

their most skilled commanders under great suspicion, preventing talent from circulating through the military corps. In *A Vindication*, Burke lamented the tale of General Agricola, who “was obliged to enter *Rome* with all the Secrecy of a Criminal” after a major victory so as not to outshine the reigning emperor. Under the “horrid despotism of the Roman Emperors,” the traditional estates of the realm lacked effective force in government, while the virtues and talents of worthy men went unrewarded to the detriment of the Empire.⁹¹

The character of the Roman people underwent a drastic sea change as well. Orations abandoned their traditional exhortations of liberty in favor of servile obsequiousness. When the rebellious British Chieftain Caractacus was brought to Rome as a prisoner, his speech to the emperor moved him to commute the sentence. In former times, the Romans would have treated captive princes harshly. Now the city, bereft of “that fierce republican spirit,” wholeheartedly approved. They had succumbed to monarchical mores, granting them “respect for the character of unfortunate sovereigns.”⁹²

The contrast that Burke chose to draw between the virtuous Republic and corrupt Empire signifies an element of classical republicanism in his thought. As Strauman argues, discourse on the lessons of Roman history formed two distinct schools of thought: the constitutionalist and classical republican. Burke’s focus on Roman national character and its decline under the emperors seems to place him in the latter camp. While the institutional design of the Republic and its role in representing the corporate groups could not be discounted, this arrangement was only possible insofar that it was supported by the spirit of *pietas* that defined Roman character. Manners and mores held far greater strength than the twelve tables of Roman law, which by themselves were “dead and putrid” and unable to regenerate the state once it had declined.⁹³ The

⁹¹ Burke, *A Vindication of the Natural Society* (Indianapolis, ID: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1982), 22.

⁹² Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 193-194.

⁹³ Burke, *Select Works Vol. III*, “First Letter on Regicide Peace,” 75.

reach of the law is limited to prohibiting certain actions and encouraging others, affecting civil behavior only “here and there, and now and then.” Manners, in contrast, are all-pervasive: they “vex or soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us, by a constant, steady, uniform, insensible operation, like that of the air we breathe in.”⁹⁴ Roman manners under the Republic tended to purify and exalt. Yet, they could not be recovered or renewed through legislation alone.

Although Roman mores lacked the essential ingredients of Christianity and chivalry that defined the culture Burke valued so highly, they did contain a germ of common substance. If eighteenth-century European manners was defined by commercial prosperity, “the spirit of a gentleman, and the spirit of religion,” Rome, at its best, was not far behind this standard.⁹⁵ Though it lacked Christianity and Enlightenment sociability, the Romans still valued piety toward a divine order, fidelity to the great chain of ancestors, corporate solidarity, and moderate aristocratic leadership. The British and Roman Constitutions both subsisted on a traditional set of manners and pluralistic institutional arrangements that secured unity within diversity.

⁹⁴ Burke, “First Letter on Regicide Peace,” 126-127.

⁹⁵ Burke, *Reflections*, 241.

CHAPTER II:

“To Spare the Conquered and Subdue the Proud”: Burke and the Roman Empire

Edmund Burke’s career extended over a period of fundamental change in the size and composition of the British Empire. Before the American Revolution, as David Armitage has shown, the Empire was primarily conceived of as essentially “Protestant, commercial, maritime, and free.”⁹⁶ While it was certainly neither “Protestant” for the Irish nor “free” for the millions of chattel slaves in the Atlantic colonies, it plausibly contrasted with the Catholic, agrarian, territorial, and monarchical empires of France and Spain.⁹⁷ But, this image shattered following the Treaty of Paris in 1783 when the American colonial core achieved its independence. As the remnants of the Empire were now populated mainly by disparate groups of Irish and Québécois Catholics, African slaves in the Caribbean, and a growing number of Hindus and Muslims in India, the imperial self-identity was forced to adapt. Moreover, this took place in the context of a

⁹⁶ David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 7-11.

⁹⁷ Kostas Vlassopoulos, "Imperial Encounters: Discourses of Empire and the Uses of Ancient History in the Eighteenth-Century," In *Classics and Imperialism in the British Empire*, edited by Mark Bradley, 29-53 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

rapidly shifting European balance of power after the French Revolution in 1789. As a result, Burke could hardly avoid thinking about the role and purpose of the Empire if he was to participate in the politics of his time.

Since the British Empire was of relatively recent origin compared to the time-honored British Constitution, Burke's usual recourse to prescription and custom as in domestic constitutional matters was not always available to him when discussing imperial issues. Relations between the metropole and the peripheries were malleable and open to reform and negotiation. Above all, what needed to be protected was Britain's global strategic interests and its much-vaunted Constitution, which was perpetually threatened by forces generated by imperial adventures. Often, this anxiety surfaced in his criticism of British policies in India, Ireland, and the American colonies. Some scholars like Uday Mehta have taken this to suggest that Burke opposed imperialism in principle.⁹⁸ However, as O'Neill conclusively demonstrates, Burke was steadfastly committed to the legitimacy, preservation, and expansion of Britain's overseas possessions throughout his political life.⁹⁹ Imperialism in a world of empires was a fundamental and necessary feature of world order.¹⁰⁰ The more critical question, then, is: what type of empire did Burke envision and promote?

While the complete answer to this question is beyond the scope of the chapter, it must be asked to understand Rome's influence on Burke's idea of the empire. All European empires live in the shadow of Rome. To Burke, the British were no different in the sense that they shared in her glory and were subject to the same trajectories of decline. As Armitage argues, British historians in the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries, inspired by the Roman histories of Sallust

⁹⁸ Uday Singh Mehta, "Edmund Burke and the Perils of Empire," In *Liberalism and Empire: a Study in Nineteenth-century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 153-189.

⁹⁹ Daniel O'Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 27-29.

¹⁰⁰ Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 9.

and Machiavelli, worried that when empires expand, they require armies, bureaucracies, and tax revenues to administer. These institutional innovations lay the groundwork for the concentration of power and autocratic rule. The British Empire could escape this expansion trap if it remained predominantly maritime—knit together by naval rather than infantry power—and therefore less likely to prove an instrument for tyranny. Similarly, trade and commerce could replace military conquest as a more peaceful and civilized means of statecraft. Empire and liberty could, therefore, coexist.¹⁰¹

However, by Burke's time, the credibility of the sea-faring empire paradigm had begun to break down with the American Revolution and subsequent imperial focus on India requiring a more permanent land-infantry build-up and administrative apparatus. Instability in Ireland threatened the territorial integrity of the metropole itself. Both the Constitution and Empire appeared to be on the brink of collapse. Confronted with these crises, Burke echoed the imperial anxieties learned from his reading of Roman decline. At the same time, he was also open to adapting Roman models to an empire that had grown more diverse in its composition.

This chapter will first explore Burke's views on the Roman Empire developed in one of his earliest works: *An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History* (hereafter referred to as "*An Abridgment*"). Originally intended as the first volume in a series of books on England's past, the essay includes several chapters detailing the Roman presence on the island. Burke displayed an ambivalent attitude toward the occupiers, whom he portrayed as both oppressors and civilizers. At their best, the Romans respected native customs and institutions while slowly integrating them into the imperial system and culture. However, the Empire declined once it adopted a more uniform and centralized form of administration that dispensed with the heterogeneity needed to maintain provincial allegiance.

¹⁰¹ Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, 141-145.

The following sections discuss Burke's selective and pragmatic application of Roman maxims to contemporary imperial contexts in the Americas, India, and Ireland. Instead of superimposing a general theory of Roman policy onto imperial problems, Burke singled out particular approaches that best approximated local circumstances. In the case of the American crisis, Burke determined that the methods of antique empires were of little use. The dispute over the parliamentary right to tax was a dilemma peculiar to English history and statecraft, though the pitfalls of the Roman experience still lay in wait for imperial arrogance. Oppositely, the particular exigencies of East India Company rule in the East and the exclusion of Ireland's Catholics from civil rights proved more fertile for classical comparisons and solutions.

I. The Roman Empire in *An Abridgment*

Burke's account of Roman colonization in *An Abridgment* is his most detailed and focused work dealing with Roman history. Originally published in 1757, the work sought to cater to public demand for an impartial national history, a genre previously dominated by political polemicists.¹⁰² In it, Burke focused on the gradual, sedimental development of English law, political institutions, religion, and society. The work begins in antiquity with the birth of civilization in Europe.

Burke grounded his analysis of British history and its Roman colonization in geography and its influence on the development of human civilization and institutions. Europe, he divided into two parts—north and south—cordoned off from each other by “immense and continued chains of mountains.” This natural division ensured that “manners and usages” of the nations composing these two blocs would remain distinct, particularly in the ancient world. In his narrative of antique Europe, Burke pinpointed environment and geography as the sources of

¹⁰² T. O. McLoughlin, "Edmund Burke's "Abridgment of English History"." *Eighteenth-Century Ireland / Iris an Dá Chultúr* 5 (1990): 45-59. Accessed April 22, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30070886>.

national character and institutions, at least in their initial phases. Northern Europe, distinguished by its flat landscape, offered no “considerable obstacle to hostile incursions.” Consequently, the Scythian tribes of this region lived as warriors and nomads in “perpetual flux and reflux.” However, the constant churn of tribal conflict produced no discernible progress in “manners,” which remained unsophisticated and ferocious. Only Roman domination could deliver the Gauls, Germans, and Celts from the “ruggedness of primitive barbarism” and introduce the refinement and comfort of Mediterranean civilization.¹⁰³

Burke believed that the original inhabitants of Southern Europe were “of the same race of people of Northern Europe” since they shared similar languages. Yet, the differences in climate and geography substantially altered their cultures. Protected by mountain ranges and amenable to Mediterranean sea routes, Southern Europeans quickly learned the arts of civilization. The circumscribed geography of Spain, Italy, and Greece also encouraged the inhabitants to settle in permanent communities. Sea-faring colonists arrived from “the great fountains of the ancient civility and learning” of Phoenicia, Asia Minor, and Egypt. Nevertheless, social development did not break the martial spirit. Since the peoples of the region organized into city-states competing for limited resources, they were “well exercised in arms” and highly disciplined. Rome, emerging from this melee, excelled above its neighbors and repeatedly defeated Gallic incursions into Italy. Burke attributed these victories to the shrewdness and pragmatism of the Roman elites who “drew some advantage from every turn of fortune, and, victorious or vanquished, persisted in one uniform and comprehensive plan of breaking to pieces everything which endangered their safety or obstructed their greatness.”¹⁰⁴ This was not necessarily intrinsic to the Roman character but the result of the pressures of the external political environment, which had derived from

¹⁰³ Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 159-162.

¹⁰⁴ Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 162.

Italy's peculiar geography. Therefore, the Roman Empire was the natural result of a national character that formed in response to recurring geopolitical conditions.

It was only once Julius Caesar subdued Gaul that the Romans first became aware of Britain. Caesar suspected that the neighboring Britons and Germans would soon conspire to liberate their Celtic compatriots from Roman rule. Thus, he decided to keep them on a defensive crouch by launching an invasion of Britain. However, Burke noted that Caesar's military strategies were always double-sided. On the one hand, there were clear strategic reasons for invading Britain and securing the periphery of Gaul from external threats. On the other hand, for Caesar, "it was towards Rome that he always looked, and to the furtherance of his interest there that all his motions were really directed." Continuing military campaigns in the north would bolster Caesar's political position. It would "at once raise his character, keep his interest alive at Rome, endear him to his troops, and by that means weaken the ties which held them to their country."¹⁰⁵ Conquest furnished the means for undermining republican norms.

Caesar's advantages over the Germans and Britons were many. In awe of their invaders' technical prowess, the Germans quickly sued for peace once the Romans constructed a bridge over the Rhine. Caesar then guaranteed military protection for the weaker tribes as a future excuse to intervene in the region. Burke added that this was "always the first step of the Roman policy" in gradually subjecting foreign realms to conquest.¹⁰⁶ Next, Caesar turned toward the strange land of Britain. The Britons "had no regular polity with a standing coercive power" and were thrice defeated over two separate campaigns by Caesar's smaller but more disciplined and well-equipped legions. After securing hostages to prevent future incursions into Gaul, Caesar left the island without appointing a governor. Burke took this as evidence that Caesar's motivations

¹⁰⁵ Burke, "An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History," 163.

¹⁰⁶ Burke, "An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History," 164-165.

for invading Britain developed from political calculations rather than an imperial grand strategy. The invasion “afforded his party in Rome an opportunity of promoting his interest and exaggerating his exploits.” Internal politics, not external pressures, were the decisive factor propelling imperial enlargement.¹⁰⁷

Burke held true to this explanation in his account of Rome’s later, more successful attempts at colonizing Britain. After Caesar, Roman domestic politics rapidly centered around the person of the emperor. Hence, foreign and military policy flowed directly outward from the Palatine to the provinces. As mentioned in the last chapter, each *princeps* put his own signature stamp on imperial policy. Augustus and Tiberius decided on cautious strategies, rejecting the further expansion of the empire. The former did so on principle, and the latter out of suspicion for rivals. Caligula, in all of his crazed vanity, adopted an ambitious plan to invade Britain once again only to withdraw suddenly and return to Rome in triumph. It was not until the reign of Emperor Claudius that a permanent Roman presence in Britain was established. Claudius, who owed the imperial purple “almost entirely to the affection of the soldiery,” was anxious to prove himself the “head of a military constitution.” He decided that a successful invasion of Britain would increase his prestige without risking that of the Empire’s.¹⁰⁸

Seizing on the Britons’ failure to pay tribute, Claudius led an army to the island, quickly dispatching the fractious tribal kingdoms. Ostorius, the new governor of the province, moved to disarm the natives, secure a fortified frontier along the Severn River, and settle veteran colonies. Regarding the native Britons, he adopted a policy of indirect rule and elite cooptation, appointing “kings of their own race” to rule over them. Burke marked this as a particularly advantageous strategy since it both flattered both native “pride” and left the indigenous princes in a position of

¹⁰⁷ Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 168-169.

¹⁰⁸ Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 189-191.

“interested fidelity” to the emperor.¹⁰⁹ Burke remarked, with an unattributed paraphrase of Tacitus, “Such was the dignity and extent of the Roman policy that they could number even royalty amongst the instruments of their servitude.”¹¹⁰ Nonetheless, the success of the Roman conquest of Britain owed to “their discipline and the weight and excellence of their arms,” which “prevailed over the naked bravery of this gallant people.”¹¹¹

Ostorius’ successor, Suetonius Paulinus, pursued a deliberately cruel strategy against the natives. He led an expedition against the Druidic citadel in Anglesey, burning the priests at the stake and setting fire to their sacred forest. This provoked a widespread insurrection throughout the province, highlighting the futility of Paulinus’ methods. Burke also criticized the provincial government’s expropriation of royal property and the rapacious nature of tax collection on what was still a largely pastoral society. Taxes were “laid on without discretion, extorted without mercy, and, even when respited, made utterly ruinous by exorbitant usury...”¹¹² The accumulation of these abuses inflamed a second, more severe uprising led by the warrior-queen, Boadicea. Burke claimed that Roman rule might have ended in Britain at this moment had not Paulinus marshaled all available forces to surprise-offensive on Boadicea’s far-larger, if less organized force. Following his victory, the triumphant legate launched a vicious reprisal on the Britons. Even Emperor Nero, disgusted by the display, dismissed him from his post. Unfortunately, Paulinus’ successors replaced his cruelty with inaction and allowed the security of the provincial frontiers to deteriorate.¹¹³

The redemption of Roman imperial administration arrived in the person of Agricola, “a man by whom it was a happiness for the Britons to be conquered.” Agricola’s combination of a

¹⁰⁹ Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 192-193.

¹¹⁰ Tacitus, *The Complete Works of Tacitus*, “Agricola,” Edited by Moses John Hadas, Translated by Alfred Jackson Church and William Cornelius Brodribb, (New York: Modern Library, 1942) 685.

¹¹¹ Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 193.

¹¹² Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 193-197.

¹¹³ Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 197-199.

vigorous military strategy, religious toleration, honest administration, and civilizing mission makes him one of the few characters Burke praised in his saga. Entrusted by Emperor Vespasian with the affairs of the province, Agricola embodied both the civic virtues required in a republic and the “moderation and reserve” of an imperial statesman. His military policy was firm and energetic, quickly stifling the northern tribes and leading a devastating foray into Scotland. With Britannia stabilized, Agricola turned his attention to “the great labors of peace.” “Pity[ing] the condition and respect[ing] the prejudices of the conquered,” he restored the Druids to their ancient groves, which Paulinus had desecrated. He discontinued the rapacious practices that attended tax collection, dismissed factious and corrupt officials, and replaced them with administrators with genuine merit. More importantly, Agricola “reconciled the Britons to the Roman government by reconciling them to Roman manners.” Gradually, the Britons developed “a fondness for baths, for gardens, for grand houses, and all the commodious elegancies of a cultivated life.” Moreover, he introduced the first schools and paid for the sons of local chiefs to be educated in Rome. In time, the Britons would “exchange a savage liberty for a polite and easy subjection.” Burke commended Agricola’s efforts as “a perfect model” for those who wished to bring civilization to the more benighted parts of the world.¹¹⁴

The protracted and gradual nature of the Roman conquest of Britain forced Burke to draw an important distinction between republican and imperial modes of warfare. When the Early Republic conducted wars, it was animated by “one uniform spirit” in “one body” with the whole population mobilized for the effort. The existential and unitary nature of republican warfare dictated that “With whatever state they were engaged, the war was so prosecuted as if the Republic could not subsist, unless that particular enemy were totally destroyed.” However, once Roman *imperium* stretched throughout the Mediterranean, its conduct altered. More concerned

¹¹⁴ Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 199-202.

with keeping internal order within their multitude of provinces, Rome's leaders sought a "moderate policy" with their neighbors, using military force to "awe and weaken rather than destroy." To Burke, this more sedated form of statecraft resembled the behavior of the "present powers of Europe."¹¹⁵ The conquest of Britain was decidedly of the latter cast and unlike the campaigns of Rome's republican youth, which had conquered wide swathes of territory in rapid succession. The contrast between republican and imperial foreign and military policy would later help define Burke's view of revolutionary France's role within the international system *vis a vis* the rest of Europe.¹¹⁶

The recurrent instability at the center of Roman imperial politics also prevented more aggressive policies against Britain. The emperors feared that victorious generals might challenge their authority and constantly shuffled and re-shuffled the high command, inhibiting long-term military operations. Furthermore, the vagaries of the factional power struggles in the court and the perpetual question of the imperial succession created an atmosphere of uncertainty for field commanders who "remained unactive till it could be determined for what master they were to conquer [sic]." Displaying too much skill in warfare might be interpreted as a provocation against the emperor.¹¹⁷ Concentrated power inhibited the proper recognition of skilled commanders.

Burke moved on to examine the methods by which the Romans governed their new province. The Romans ensured lasting subordination through the strategic recognition of local autonomy. Nations and tribes that had cooperated with Rome were rewarded with the designation of "allies" and were free to retain "their possessions, laws, and magistrates" without paying tribute. This title, however, was only temporary and acted as a "step preparatory to a

¹¹⁵ Burke, "An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History," 203.

¹¹⁶ See Chapter III.

¹¹⁷ Burke, "An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History," 203.

stricter government.” Communities labeled as “*municipia*” were granted the rights of Roman citizenship and “were models of Rome in little” though they could preserve and frame their own laws. Such privileges afforded the natives limited independence under imperial suzerainty, allowing them to maintain their ancient laws, customs, and usages as they assimilated within the Empire.¹¹⁸

Peoples that had held their own against the Roman juggernaut were treated very differently. In these territories, the Romans established *provincia*. They abolished and confiscated the lands, laws, and freedoms of rebellious tribes and imposed crushing tributes. The Senate appointed praetors with broad powers to rule such provinces directly. Just as in the Republic, these officials shared a “sacred relation, as inviolable as that of the blood.” Burke referred here to the *necessitudo sortis* described in the previous chapter. While it could act as a “firm and useful bond of concord” among elected officials, the *sortis*’ effect could be quite sinister in the imperial context. The magistrates often formed “a dangerous and oppressive combination” that shielded them from the accountability and grievances of their subjects. But, whether magistrates used the bond toward moral or immoral ends, the *sortis* aligned with the “principal purpose” of all imperial policy—“the security of dominion.” At the very least, the arrangement prevented the provincial administration from growing disunited.¹¹⁹

The *colonia* formed the final legal entity established by the Romans. Veterans of the British campaigns received grants of lands to settle and develop. Legions and their officers received block grants often strategically placed to “overawe” the natives and ensure a loyal population base organized and united by loyalty to their legions. Burke later acknowledged that

¹¹⁸ Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 205-206.

¹¹⁹ Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 206-207.

since the heirs could not legally inherit their fathers' lands, the colonies quickly fell into a state of decay.¹²⁰

The multitude of “different modes of government...and those dissimilar parts, far from being discordant, united to make a firm and compact body.” Burke understood the Empire, in its initial phases, as a mosaic encompassing a diverse array of governing structures. However, the plurality contributed to a complex unity. In time, the constituent parts “softened and blended into one another,” and the animosity generated by the conquest wore away.¹²¹ The emperors gradually extended the rights of Roman citizenship to increasing numbers of people. Even freed slaves could claim the rights of citizenship. At last, Emperor Antoninus Pius cleared the uneven morass of provincial privileges and endowed all freemen the uniform rights of Roman *civitas*, erasing “every mark of conquest.”¹²²

Even so, the process of imperial assimilation was a slow one. In the meantime, the Romans instituted a system of control and coercion to keep the provinces in line. Networks of surveillance spread to track rebellious plots. In addition to magistrates, private Roman citizens relayed information about local dissent back to the authorities. Imperial administrators distrusted local governors and even framed laws to prevent them from “receiving addresses of thanks on their administration” from their subjects. Consequently, officials would be discouraged from actively courting popularity and possibly establishing their own personal fiefdoms. Though, on the other hand, laws existed to keep governors from engaging in embezzlement and mal-administration. Although officially at peace, considerable numbers of troops barracked in Britain, especially on the northern border. The system of civil and military control was held intact by roads that spanned the island, keeping the lines of communication and military

¹²⁰ Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 208-209, 225.

¹²¹ Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 209.

¹²² Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 220.

mobilization available in case of revolts.¹²³ On top of this repressive military establishment, Burke criticized the Roman proclivity for levying multiple and punitive taxes. The staggering bill led many provinces into deep debt. Some sought loans from the “overgrown favorites and wealthy nobility of Rome,” exacerbating their fiscal woes. In all, “the taxes in the Roman Empire were so heavy, and in many respects unjudiciously laid on, that they have been not improperly considered as one cause of its decay and ruin.”¹²⁴

As a result of the military presence, surveillance system, and onerous debt traps, Burke assessed Roman rule “hard and austere,” containing within itself “the spirit of conquest” rather than a genuine concern for imperial welfare. The same spirit of conquest would, over the centuries, bring the “unwieldy mass of an overgrown dominion” to a breaking point. The emperors’ failure to establish a durable principle of succession and the restless barbarian threat on the Rhine gradually dragged the provinces away from the Empire. At the same time, power, especially over the army, continually centralized in the person of the emperor. Facing imminent threats on the continent, the empire withdrew its legions from Britain in the early fifth-century, leaving the isle vulnerable to the raids of the Angles and Saxons. Consequently, the seeds of civilization that might have taken root in Britain due to Roman tutelage were swept away.¹²⁵ According to Sato, Burke’s analysis of imperial decline was familiar to contemporary audiences. Though he disagreed with Gibbon’s assessment that Christianity sapped the will of the Empire.¹²⁶

The somewhat negative depiction of Roman rules suggests Burke’s historiographical debt to Montesquieu’s *Considerations on the Causes of the Grandeur and Declension of the Roman Empire*. Both authors draw attention to imperial extortion and tax-gathering as significant

¹²³ Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 210.

¹²⁴ Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 221-226.

¹²⁵ Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 225-226.

¹²⁶ Sato, *Edmund Burke as Historian*, 87-88.

defects. As Courtney argues, although Burke did not cite the Baron directly, he relied on the works of Tacitus and Caesar, whom Montesquieu suggested for studies of this sort. Burke later cited Montesquieu's influence on him in his discussion of the Anglo-Saxon Constitution.¹²⁷ Like Burke, Montesquieu condemned Roman greed for committing "a thousand crimes...purely for the sake of giving to the Romans all the money in the universe." He also draws attention to the gradual methods by which the provinces were ensnared and "blended" into Rome's power.¹²⁸

Nonetheless, there were glimmers of light that partially redeem the imperial experience. Burke limited these critical assessments to the Roman dominion over Britain rather than the Empire as a whole. In other provinces, like Gaul and Hispania, the legacy of Roman law, language, customs, and civilization found more enduring roots. For this reason, Burke credited the Romans as the "legislators of mankind."¹²⁹ They could prove tolerant of difference if only to secure allegiance. The Romans respected the customs and institutions of their subject people, allowing friendly tribes to keep a semblance of autonomy. Nevertheless, the Romans slowly acclimated their possessions to their rule by introducing civilized arts, sciences, and lifestyles as well as building cities and colonies with Roman laws and magistrates. The gradual blending wore down differences in culture and identity between the imperial center and periphery, laying the foundation for European civilization. The productive tension between imperial unity and provincial autonomy that Burke recognized within the Roman world would soon come to the fore in his analysis of Britain's own imperial dilemmas in the eighteenth-century.

II. The New World

¹²⁷ C. P. Courtney, *Montesquieu and Burke*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963) 52-53.

¹²⁸ Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The Complete Works, Vol. III*, "Considerations on the Causes of the Grandeur and Declension of the Roman Empire," The Online Library of Liberty, (Indianapolis: The Liberty Fund 2011) 38-39.

¹²⁹ Burke, "An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History," 320.

It might be tempting to argue that Burke's depiction of the Roman Empire in *An Abridgment*—a heterogeneous mass of interlocking sub-units supervised by the central sovereign—helped define Burke's view of the American crisis. However, Burke did not frame his proposals for imperial unity as an explicit homage to Roman imperial policy. Rather, he was skeptical about the applications of Roman history. Classical precedents did not fit the American crisis context for several vital reasons. As Burke claimed, "We cannot resort to the example of Roman and Greek colonies."¹³⁰ He further warned in *Observations on a Late State of the Nation* that parliamentarians who groped for the wisdom of "the most respectable authorities, ancient or modern...drawn from the experience of other states and empires, will be liable to the greatest errors imaginable."¹³¹ Recklessly invoking superficial historical parallels would create faulty assumptions and all but ensure serious policy failures.

In the Roman world, the sovereign right of the Senate or Emperor to impose taxes on the provinces was unquestioned. Provincial subjects might complain of the level or the means of collection, as *An Abridgment* demonstrated. However, the primary controversies of the ancient states and empires concerned questions of representation and suffrage; "Most of the contests in the ancient commonwealths turned primarily on the right of election of magistrates; or on the balance among the several orders of the state."¹³² Political arguments over taxation were, by comparison, of more recent provenance. The issue of Parliament's sovereignty over the American colonies was a unique problem not only in the history of the British Empire but also in the history of empire in general. As Burke bluntly put it, "nothing in history is parallel to it." One

¹³⁰ Qtd. in O'Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire*, 50.

¹³¹ Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol. II*, "Observations on the Late State of the Nation," 76.

¹³² Edmund Burke, *Select Works of Edmund Burke Vol. I*, "Speech of Edmund Burke Esq. on Moving his Resolutions for Conciliation with the Colonies," *The Online Library of Liberty*, (Indianapolis: The Liberty Fund 2011) 237-238.

could only understand the situation with reference to the “actual circumstances” of Britain’s Atlantic empire.¹³³

Therefore, it would be more plausible to say that Burke’s analysis of the colonial crisis emphasized themes similar to those he developed in *An Abridgment* even if the history did not offer direct analogies. In both cases, Burke highlighted the value of protecting local institutions from imperial centralization. The latter often ironically leads to political enervation rather than vigor. Similarly, Agricola’s efforts to civilize British culture highlighted the importance of the intangible bonds of affection that linked imperial subjects to the metropole. In the British Empire, shared religion, laws, and culture constituted these trans-Atlantic ties.

In his *Speech on Moving Resolutions for Conciliation with the Colonies*, Burke outlined six conditions that ought to determine British policy for its American possessions. American national character was a concentrated variant of the English identity, valuing the ancestral rights of freeborn Englishmen. Ties of descent from English ancestors, the tradition of taxation with representation, the staunch Protestantism of the dissenting variety in the northern colonies, the “high and haughty” spirit of the slave-holding South, the solid lawyerly devotion to the common law, and the natural limits on the exercise of power in an extended empire all combined to nourish this identity. As Burke articulated, “In large bodies the circulation of power must be less vigorous at the extremities.”¹³⁴ For all of these reasons, London could not simply govern the colonies as a collection of vassal states expected to follow the whims of the mother country.

The Roman Empire had also collapsed as a result of geographical over-extension. Yet, the toppling of British authority in the thirteen colonies was of a different character. Though the logistical problems involved with managing possessions a hemisphere away were evident, the

¹³³ Burke, “Observations on the Late State of the Nation,” 76.

¹³⁴ Burke, “Speech of Edmund Burke Esq. on Moving his Resolutions for Conciliation with the Colonies,” 237-242.

true reason for separation was the British government's failure to uphold common English standards. "English privileges alone" had shaped colonial society, and "English privileges alone will make it all that can be."¹³⁵ Statesmen in Whitehall would be mistaken to use local privileges and rights as mere carrots to accompany the stick of military coercion as the Romans had done. Instead, such guarantees would have to be permanent features of British policy because they formed the "cement" and "cohesion" of the imperial system.¹³⁶

In the same way, Burke's proposal to salvage trans-Atlantic relations diverges from his description of Roman imperial policy. Instead of gradual incorporation and centralization, the British Empire should preserve a quasi-federal arrangement with significant and assured autonomy to colonial legislatures while Parliament in its "imperial character...superintends all the several inferior legislatures, and guides and controls them without annihilating any." Local governments handled local matters, while questions concerning the whole Empire and its defense were the domain of Parliament.¹³⁷ As O'Neill makes clear, this was not a rejection of parliamentary sovereignty in principle but prudent management of its practice.¹³⁸

After the American Revolution erupted in 1775, Burke looked back again more explicitly to the classical past. In his *Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol*, Burke lamented that the conflict resembled a civil war with all of its baleful consequences, "striking deepest of all into the manners of the people. They vitiate their politics; they corrupt their morals; they pervert even the

¹³⁵ Burke, "Speech of Edmund Burke Esq. on Moving his Resolutions for Conciliation with the Colonies," 289.

¹³⁶ Burke, "Speech of Edmund Burke Esq. on Moving his Resolutions for Conciliation with the Colonies," 287.

¹³⁷ Edmund Burke, *Select Works of Edmund Burke Vol. I*, "Speech on American Taxation," The Online Library of Liberty, (Indianapolis: The Liberty Fund 2011) 217-218.

¹³⁸ O'Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire*, 60. And Bruce Frohnen, "An Empire of Peoples: Burke, Government, and National Character." In *Edmund Burke: His Life and Legacy* (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 1997).

natural taste and relish of equality and justice.”¹³⁹ Though he did not reference the decline of the Roman Republic, he did invoke the same themes of the dissipation of civic virtue and mores that he lamented when discussing the Republic. If the war continued, even Britain’s maritime and commercial insurance against military despotism might not hold. Further, military adventures overseas in the 1780s soon forced Burke to return to the classics again, this time on a much more detailed basis.

III. India

If Roman history could not effectively guide imperial policy in the thirteen colonies, why does it suddenly attain utility when Burke faced British imperialism in India? The answer to this question, as always with Burke, lies in the circumstances that he faced. In particular, these included his efforts to draft and pass Charles Fox’s India Bill through Parliament and his subsequent impeachment crusade against Warren Hastings, the former Governor-General of the East India Company. Unlike the argument over taxation and parliamentary sovereignty, the question of official malfeasance and accountability in the imperial setting had obvious and direct parallels with Roman history. Burke was all too aware of this and sought to use them to his advantage throughout his time focused on Indian issues. As O’Neill explains, one of Burke’s hurdles was public unfamiliarity and disinterest in the distant subcontinent. To overcome this obstacle, Burke likened Indian affairs to subjects with which eighteenth-century Britons were well acquainted.¹⁴⁰ Roman history was the favorite subject of a whiggish Parliament, and Burke utilized it in three senses. First, the Republic’s collapse through the corruptions of imperial conquest served as a warning for Britain’s constitutional order. Second, the EIC’s nature failed to

¹³⁹ Edmund Burke, *A Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol*, Ed. by James Hugh Moffat, (New York: Hinds, Noble, and Eldredge 1904) 15.

¹⁴⁰ O’Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire*, 107.

accord with the more commendable aspects of Roman imperial statecraft. Third, the Roman Republic provided an example of how liberty and empire might be preserved together.

Unlike the New World, India was a land where a vibrant civilization had flourished for thousands of years. By “civilization,” Burke meant that India possessed a hierarchical society buttressed by a landed aristocracy and established priesthood.¹⁴¹ Like Europe, India had its ancient orders of kings, nobles, and priests. Its social order—a “vast mass, composed of so many orders and classes of men”—was “infinitely diversified by manners, by religion, by hereditary employment, through all their possible combinations.” The fragmented remains of the Mughal Empire resembled the Holy Roman Empire, with its various rajas taking the place of German princes and electors.¹⁴² This description, in part, was intended to draw the sympathy of British politicians whom Burke assumed would identify with the rajas and zamindars mistreated by the EIC.¹⁴³ At the same time, by noting the strong similarities between India and Europe, Burke rendered analogies with the classical age more appropriate. Burke was not the only one to make this connection. Philip Francis had argued that the Mughals governed in the style of the Romans. Nathaniel Halhed, an orientalist and associate of Hastings, had also argued in the 1770s that the East India Company should adopt the model of the Romans and respect local laws and customs while framing new legal codes.¹⁴⁴

With this familiar framework in place, Burke could easily lavish his speeches with Roman sentiments. Like *The Speech to the Bristol Sheriffs*, Burke articulated his fears of imperial corruption impairing the British Constitution. If the violence and oppression of war abroad desensitized Britons to tyranny at home, the ill-gotten wealth and the arts of despotism

¹⁴¹ O’Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire*, 107.

¹⁴² Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol. V*, “Speech on Fox’s India Bill,” 390.

¹⁴³ O’Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire*, 95-8.

¹⁴⁴ Quoted in Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 583-4.

acquired in the East would work to the same effect. Former company administrators had infiltrated high society: “They marry into your families; they enter into your senate;” cultivating a faction that sabotaged efforts at company reform.¹⁴⁵ This was a classic Roman anxiety. The riches of the Orient seductively enervated the martial and self-sacrificing spirit that had conquered them. He continued that “Rome never felt within herself the seeds of decline, till corruption from foreign misconduct impaired her vitals...the inroads of corruption destroyed the political frame, then were all things at stake.”¹⁴⁶ The classical republican fixation on civic virtue applied as much to imperial affairs as domestic and constitutional ones. Just as the Romans instituted the office of the censor to maintain the probity of the Senate, Britain required “a great censorial prosecution, for the purpose of preserving the manners, characters, and virtues that characterise the people of England.”¹⁴⁷

Even as he whipped up classical anxieties, Burke also demonstrated how the EIC had departed from Rome’s more wholesome institutes. The commercial-administrative-military apparatus of the East India Company differed significantly in nature from the Roman provincial administration in the Late Republic. The Romans established political order over a province first before facilitating commercial activity. Trade “follow[ed] as a necessary consequence of the protection obtained by political power.” The Roman civil law separated the rights of merchants from those of a lord for this reason. The company had reversed this process, beginning “in commerce and end[ed] in Empire.”¹⁴⁸ The original charter granted by Elizabeth I restricted the company to “commercial affairs.” However, as the company grew increasingly engrossed in

¹⁴⁵ Burke, “Speech on Fox’s India Bill,” 403.

¹⁴⁶ Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol. VI*, “Speech on Motion for Papers on Hasting 20th of February,” 1786, 61.

¹⁴⁷ Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol. VII*, “Speech on the Sixth Article 7th of May, 1789,” 61-62.

¹⁴⁸ Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol. VI*, “Speech on the Opening of Impeachment 15th of February, 1788,” 283.

South Asian politics and conflicts, the remit of its charter expanded to include naval activity, criminal and civil jurisdiction, and even “the powers of Peace and War” by the reign of Charles II. The Crown had never before granted such “high prerogatives” to a commercial enterprise, and it amounted to a “delegation of the whole power and sovereignty” from His Majesty’s Government. Among all empires, both antique and modern, the assumption of sovereign powers by a business was wholly unique. Burke could not find the remotest of parallels in the annals of the Portuguese, the Moorish, the Dutch, nor, of course, the Roman Empires.¹⁴⁹

This “state in disguise of a merchant” was also peculiar in that it had no authentic connections with or accountability to the peoples of India. Even the Goths and Vandals had invaded Europe, intending to settle permanently. In doing so, they came, by necessity, to a *modus vivendi* with the original inhabitants after their conquest. But, the company did not need to forge any such arrangements since their governance was entirely transient, with officials residing in India for relatively short intervals. Burke labeled this form of governance “a nation of placemen...a commonwealth without a people” and “a state made up wholly of magistrates.” As a result, no means of redress existed “to control, to watch, to balance against the power of office.”¹⁵⁰

Left with this dangerous autonomy, company officials developed a twisted “*esprit du corps*” separate from, and at odds with, the interests of both native Indians and the British nation. Company officials were educated and formed from a very young age by the EIC’s academy. The separate education system detached officials from the standards and culture of the British elite, rooted in the humanistic values of Cicero and the Christian revelations of the “sacred and holy prophets.” Their instruction featured an inaccurate view of Asian history that emphasized

¹⁴⁹ Burke, “Speech on the Opening of Impeachment 15th of February 1788,” 286.

¹⁵⁰ Burke, “Speech on the Opening of Impeachment 15th of February 1788,” 285.

“barbarism, tyranny, and usurpation” as the only principles that held sway in Indian politics, justifying their autocratic conduct.¹⁵¹ Loyalty to the company was sealed in a “covenant” that bound them absolutely to its service, ascending from “Writer to Factor, from Factor to Junior Merchant, from Junior Merchant to Senior Merchant.”¹⁵² To break this covenant by acting as an “informer” for the government would constitute the height of infamy in the company’s warped code of honor. Though Burke did not invoke it, the EIC’s “*esprit du corps*” resembled the *necessitudo sortis* that tied Roman provincial administrators.¹⁵³ The significant difference was that, despite their shortcomings, the Romans swore oaths to the highest magistrates of the Republic, whereas the company-men swore allegiance exclusively to their employer rather than the public interest. Though the EIC received their prerogatives from the Crown they proved largely unanswerable to it. It was precisely this detachment from any established political order and the high level of corporate cohesion that made the company such a uniquely destructive and pitiless force. Whatever crimes the Romans had committed, the sins of the EIC were of a different order entirely. Rome, along with other great empires of the past, could at least claim some responsibility for the lives and fortunes of their subjects and ensure “the justice of their institutions, the mildness of their laws, and the equity of their government.” Quoting Virgil, Burke claimed that it was “the glory of all such set of peoples to have this for their Motto: *'Parcere subjectis debellare superbos.'*”¹⁵⁴

Where the Romans had erred, the company could always boast of having exceeded their crimes. In the Speech on Fox’s India Bill in 1783, Burke compared his account of corporate

¹⁵¹ Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol. VI*, “Speech on the Opening of Impeachment 16th of February 1788,” 367.

¹⁵² Burke, “Speech on the Opening of Impeachment 15th of February 1788,” 289.

¹⁵³ Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 178.

¹⁵⁴ Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol. VII*, “Speech in Reply May 30 1794,” 286. “To spare the humble, and to conquer the proud” From Virgil, *The Aeneid*. Translated by Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett 2005) Book VI, 1018.

misconduct to the histories of “Tacitus and Machiavel.” However, he assured the House of Commons that he would not adopt the latter authors’ “cold way of relating enormous crimes,” which desensitized their audiences to “the art of tyranny” and failed to forcefully condemn “horrible and detestable proceedings” (In Tacitus’ case, this was a fault of style rather than intent. Though Burke could not say the same for the Florentine). Although his own revelations were no less disturbing, Burke sought instead to arouse “sympathy” on behalf of distant and unknown Indians who had suffered wrongs.¹⁵⁵ Included among the victims were the Princesses of Oudh. Their prince, or *Wazir*, acting under the pressure of company debt collectors, had deprived them of their property and forced them out of their apartments. Burke could not help alluding to Tacitus’ description of the flight of Rome’s noblewomen from the city to escape from the sadistic Emperor Domitian: “*Nobilissimarum faeminarum exilia et fugas.*”¹⁵⁶ The quotation highlighted the EIC’s ruthlessness toward traditional Indian institutions and its lack of basic respect for tender femininity. Accounting for their multitude of other crimes, including embezzlement, bribery, extortion, and usurpation. Burke condemned the company as “one of the most corrupt and destructive tyrannies, that probably ever existed in the world.”¹⁵⁷

If the EIC had surpassed the Romans in the magnitude of their crimes, the Romans might provide some guidance in governing India with justice. Burke’s use of Rome as a constructive model of imperial statecraft is evident throughout his prosecution of Warren Hastings. The most fitting case from classical antiquity was Cicero’s celebrated trial of Lucius Verres, the corrupt and ruthless governor of Sicily. Burke weaved references, including the most obscure, to the affair throughout the impeachment proceedings. These were something of a spectacle, a means

¹⁵⁵ Burke, “Speech on Fox’s India Bill,” 403.

¹⁵⁶ Tacitus, “Agricola,” 705.

¹⁵⁷ Burke, “Speech on Fox’s India Bill,” 441.

of appealing to the classical sensibilities of the British elite.¹⁵⁸ Scholars of Burke have demonstrated many instances of his echoing of Cicero's rhetoric throughout the trial, including his puns, anaphoras, and appeals to senatorial honor and natural law over "geographical" relativism.¹⁵⁹ However, there was a substantive rather than simply stylistic element to Burke's choice of precedent. As Burke put it, the Verrine case had an instructional element for the conduct of public life.

We have all in our early education read the Verrine Orations. We read them not merely to instruct us, as they will do, in the principles of eloquence, and to acquaint us with the manners, customs, and laws of the ancient Romans, of which they are an abundant repository; but we may read them from a much higher motive. We may read them from a motive which the great author had doubtless in his view when by publishing them he left to the world and to the latest posterity a monument by which it might be seen what course a great public accuser in a great public cause ought to pursue; and as connected with it what course judges ought to pursue in deciding upon such a cause. In these orations, you will find almost every instance of rapacity and peculation, which we charge upon Mr. Hastings.¹⁶⁰

Cicero's trial, in other words, was a providential blueprint for the administration of justice preserved over the ages for future generations to apply to their own circumstances. Of course, it is worth noting that throughout Burke's prosecution, he remained firmly committed to explaining Hastings' guilt primarily through the history and circumstances of India rather than Rome. References to Cicero, Verres, and other classical paraphernalia, while an essential feature of Burke's arguments, sit alongside his no less extensive knowledge of the subcontinent's history, culture, politics, and geography. Just as in America, the circumstances of the case prevail over appeals to classical antiquity. Nonetheless, Burke's use of the Roman ideal of empire pointed toward a constructive model for the British possessions in India.

¹⁵⁸ Ayres, *Classical Culture and the Idea of Rome in Eighteenth-Century England*, 45.

¹⁵⁹ H. V. Canter, "The Impeachments of Verres and Hastings: Cicero and Burke," *The Classical Journal* 9, no. 5 (1914): 199-211. And Elizabeth Samet, "A Prosecutor and a Gentleman: Edmund Burke's Idiom of Impeachment," *ELH* 68, no. 2 (2001): 397-418.

¹⁶⁰ Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol. VII*, "Speech in Reply 16 June 1794," 663-664.

In *Speech on the Rohilla War Charge*, Burke attempted his most extended foray into antiquity throughout his Indian speeches. Empires, particularly colossal ones, are “liable to abuse of subordinate authority,” and the subject peoples consequently lack means of redressing grievances at the hands of imperial officials. The Roman Empire was no exception, and yet, as Burke argued, it possessed “various correctives” to the problem of imperial accountability. First, it had a natural advantage. The Romans possessed an “empire of continuity” encompassing a discrete “body of land and Sea not separated and all their own,” affording easy travel and communication between the provinces and the capital. Reports and accusations of abuse could circulate fluidly along the roads and sea lanes of the Empire. The geography differed from the much more far-flung collection of British possessions stretching from Hudson’s Bay to the Sea of Bengal. Second, the Roman Empire was united by the shared *lingua franca* of the Greek tongue (though Burke could have included the Latin language as well). Third, the various peoples of the Empire had mixed widely throughout the Mediterranean through trade and war, especially within the city of Rome itself. Some even built connections with the great Roman families. Though the “diffusion of slavery” accelerated this effect. Fourth, the provinces hired patrons to represent their interests in Rome. Many of these men, like Cicero, were the greatest statesmen of their era. Fifth, provincials could attain patrons by taking advantage of “the Animosities and contentions of the Roman Nobility.” In other words, aristocratic and partisan rivalries created a personal incentive for prosecuting imperial officials. Sixth, Roman legal culture considered the “character of an accuser” to be a dignified one. There was no shame or stigma in bringing cases related to official abuses before the law courts. Seventh, Roman law allowed the aggrieved provincials to bring their cases to trial rather than depending on state prosecutors. Former governors accused of injustices were temporarily deprived of their rights as

citizens to level the playing field with the accusers who often did not possess full citizenship. Eighth, and lastly, the provinces and cities could act in their corporate capacities to lodge complaints in Rome with greater fortitude and resources than might otherwise be the case.¹⁶¹

In the passage, Burke appeared to describe an idealized view of the Roman Empire of the Late Republic, specifically represented through the career of Cicero. This is a somewhat different empire from the one Burke described in *An Abridgment*. Rather than a rapacious and burdensome dominion, the empire of Cicero is a heterogeneous mass allowing a variety of political institutions to flourish. The corporate spirit that defined the Republic at its height extended and nourished the provinces. The pluralism of the Republic, and the corporate nature of the provincial governments, allowed justice to be administered and official abuses corrected. In that way, imperial expansion and republican government could coexist. However, the fact that Burke placed this halcyon age during the Late Republic—precisely when the Constitution entered its terminal phase—suggests that the stability of this arrangement was far from assured.

In the British Empire, none of the conditions Burke outlined held. Some, like its geographical diffusion, could not be overcome. The Atlantic and Indian Oceans did not resemble the Mediterranean. Other conditions, like the rules governing official prosecutions or the role of popular participation, could be attained through concerted legislative reform. Burke expanded on this view in his letters, arguing that popular participation (at least by Georgian standards) in politics could serve as a sympathetic force on behalf of the victims of corrupt or ruthless administrators. In Rome, while “The factions of the great gave countenance to the ruin of the provinces,” mal-administration was “always odious to the people at Large.”¹⁶² For example, the

¹⁶¹ Edmund Burke, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, Vol. VI, “Speech on the Rohilla War Charge,” 92-94.

¹⁶² Edmund Burke, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, Vol. V, “Letter to William Baker, 22 June 1784,” 155.

majority of the Roman public had supported Cicero's case against Verres. As Cicero understood, the "common interests of the Roman nation" aligned with those of the wronged Sicilians. The people feared official abuse rebounding upon their heads if left unchecked by the Senate.¹⁶³ The role of the people within a great empire includes advocating on behalf of the rights of provincial subjects. This was not merely sentimental solidarity but a shared concrete interest in checking elites who were liable to act unrestrainedly on the imperial peripheries. The constitutional balance between classes was no less important in the context of empire.

As such, the House of Commons, representing the popular estate of the realm, was a suitable substitute for the Senate of Cicero's day. Burke's two efforts at Indian reform: Fox's India Bill and the Hastings impeachment intended to strengthen parliamentary control over the company now that the extent and danger of its powers were known. The failed Indian reform would have vested the corporation's executive powers with an independent commission appointed jointly by Parliament and the Crown. The impeachment proceedings against Hastings began with an indictment in the Commons and an acquittal in the Lords. Though Burke did not expect to convict Hastings successfully, he hoped to stamp indelible notoriety upon the name of the EIC while also forging enduring bonds of "sympathy" between Britons and Indians.¹⁶⁴

Unfortunately, these ties proved challenging to forge. Frustrated by the failure of Fox's reforms in Parliament, Burke complained that the British public was either apathetic toward or actively supportive of "all the Tyranny, robbery, and destruction of mankind practised by the Company."¹⁶⁵ Like Emperor Caligula, "our countrymen...if the whole Gentoo [Hindu] race had but one neck, would see it cut with the most perfect indifference."¹⁶⁶ However, Burke's

¹⁶³ Cicero, *Verrine Orations*, LII.

¹⁶⁴ Marshall, "Introduction," *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, Vol. VI, 25.

¹⁶⁵ Burke, "Letter to William Baker, 22 June 1784," 155.

¹⁶⁶ Edmund Burke, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, Vol. V, "Letter to William Eden 17 May 1784," 151.

decades-long efforts over his career to raising public awareness of India's plight suggests that this parochial outlook was not immutable. If the American crisis could have been defused through a policy of parliamentary neglect, India needed parliamentary action against corporate predation.

IV. Ireland

As a Protestant Irishman, Burke was intimately aware of Ireland's centrality within the British Empire. Unfortunately, despite English rule over the island dating back to the 12th century, Ireland had failed to become a peaceful constituent kingdom in personal union with the Crown. This situation differed from the experiences of other empires, including the Roman: "Time has, by degrees, in all other places and periods, blended and coalited the conquered with the conquerors."¹⁶⁷ Burke had explained this process in great detail in *An Abridgment*. Gradual blending depended on a rough idea of the social contract as elaborated in Tacitus' account of Petilius Cerealis' speech to the Gallic tribes at Trier. The Roman general noted the Empire's provision of law and order and the sense of equality and dignity that it bestowed on its conquered allies. However, this could only be secured through taxation to fund the common defense against external combatants.

We, though so often provoked, have used the right of conquest to burden you only with the cost of maintaining peace. For the tranquility of nations cannot be preserved without armies; armies cannot exist without pay; pay cannot be furnished without tribute; all else is common between you and us. You often command our legions. You rule these and other provinces. There is no privilege, no exclusion...Give therefore your love and respect to the cause of peace, and to that capital in which we, conquerors and conquered, claim an equal right.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ Burke, Edmund, *Select Works of Edmund Burke, Vol. IV*, "A Letter To Sir Hercules Langrishe On The Catholics Of Ireland," 123.

¹⁶⁸ Burke, "A Letter To Sir Hercules Langrishe On The Catholics Of Ireland," 123. Quoted from Tacitus, "The Histories," 646-647.

Here, Burke repeated his contention in *An Abridgment* that the Roman Empire worked to conciliate and incorporate disparate tribes and peoples under its aegis. Though unlike in *An Abridgment*, he appeared to commend Roman imperial policy. As a general justification for imperial rule, Burke found Cerealis' speech persuasive. Yet, he was skeptical as to whether it matched Irish realities. The English had held Ireland "For a much longer period" than the Roman occupation of Britain and with far less encouraging results. All that English rule accomplished was the construction of an antagonistic barrier between religious sects; "the Protestants settled in Ireland considered themselves...a colonial garrison, to keep the natives in subjection..."¹⁶⁹ Through the Penal and Test Acts, Irish Catholics had been excluded from voting, holding office, serving on juries, attending university, and bearing arms.¹⁷⁰ Unlike Roman Gaul, Ireland in the 1790s could hardly claim neither exclusion nor privilege. Therefore, Westminster and Dublin Castle would be wrong to expect much allegiance on the Irish's part to the defense of the realm in general.

Furthermore, it was the defense of the realm that weighed heavily on Burke and other imperial statesmen in the aftermath of the French Revolution in the 1790s. Cerealis meant to remind the Gauls of the perils of alliance with the Germanic tribes beyond the frontier. The Germans had promised the Gauls "liberty" and other "specious names" as pretenses for their invasion.¹⁷¹ However, these were obvious fig leaves for their own imperial ambitions: "Never did any man seek to enslave his fellows and secure dominion for himself without using the very same words."¹⁷² This paralleled the seductive promises of the French revolutionaries who sought

¹⁶⁹ Burke, "A Letter To Sir Hercules Langrishe On The Catholics Of Ireland," 123-124.

¹⁷⁰ O'Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire*, 125.

¹⁷¹ Tacitus, "The Histories," 646-647. "Liberty, indeed, and the like specious names are their pretexts; but never did any man seek to enslave his fellows and secure dominion for himself without using the same words."

¹⁷² Tacitus, "The Histories," 646.

to attach their cause to Irish discontent. In fact, Burke had quoted the same passage in the *Appeal from the Old Whigs to the New* in criticizing French appeals to liberty, equality, and fraternity.¹⁷³

If Britain wanted to keep Ireland from the Jacobins, it would have to significantly reform the island's social system, including the tolerance of Catholics into public life. The Protestant minority that elected the Irish Parliament included not only the wealthy members of the landowning ascendancy but also hundreds of thousands of humble artisans and farmers. Together they formed a "plebeian oligarchy"—too circumscribed to constitute a democratic regime and yet "too numerous to answer to the ends and purposes of an aristocracy."¹⁷⁴ The sectarian basis of civil rights cut across the far more relevant class structure of Irish society, distorting the natural aristocracy of the kingdom. Ireland had its Catholic nobility and gentry who remained excluded from their rightful place in government. Their natural ambition and entitlement would render them a source of instability and leave them susceptible to French propaganda. In other polities, if the state legally distinguished between classes and orders, it made some attempt to balance the scales by offering distinct privileges and rights to each group. If the nobility secured ownership of all government offices, they would have to be "excluded from commerce, manufacture, farming of land, and in general from all lucrative civil professions." While the nobility kept a "monopoly of honor," the "plebeians" possessed a "monopoly on the means of acquiring wealth."¹⁷⁵ As Burke knew, such had been the case in the early Roman Republic, with the patricians excluded from the mercantile trades reserved for the plebeians. If the British Isles were to remain united under the British Crown, Ireland must have her own order of genuine patricians, Protestant and Catholic, to mix and balance the state.

¹⁷³ Burke, "An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs," 175.

¹⁷⁴ Burke, "A Letter To Sir Hercules Langrishe On The Catholics Of Ireland," 114.

¹⁷⁵ Burke, "A Letter To Sir Hercules Langrishe On The Catholics Of Ireland," 114-115.

In *An Abridgment*, Burke projected ambivalence about the Roman Empire's promise of equal citizenship since it tended to flatten social distinctions and aid centralization. At the same time, it effaced the animosities that brutal conquest had sown. In Ireland, the precarious situation dictated that something approximating the Roman ideal of *civis Romanum sum* was needed. In any case, Burke believed such a course would strengthen social and political hierarchies in such a way as to make Ireland a more sustainable component kingdom within the British Empire. This particular argument is representative of his engagement with the history of the Roman Empire. Instead of making broad and inaccurate comparisons between British and Roman *imperium*, Burke prudently selected parallels from his deep understanding of Roman history to match the specific circumstances of the imperial situations that he dealt with.

CHAPTER III: “A Martial Republick”: Echoes of Rome in the French Revolution

The principal figures of the French Revolution were as steeped in the classics as Burke. Georges Danton, Maximilien Robespierre, Louis Saint-Just, Camille Desmoulins, and many others all obtained their education at France's *collèges*, renowned for their classical ethos. Although admiration for the Greeks and Romans had more of a subversive connotation in *ancien régime* France, it was still pervasive among the intellectual elite.¹⁷⁶ The stern liberty of Cato and Brutus provided an attractive alternative to the corrupt and overgrown monarchical and ecclesiastical order.¹⁷⁷ Thus, one might expect Burke to criticize the French fixation on the classics as dangerous to European civilization. J. G. A. Pocock, for instance, casts Burke as a “defender of the Whig order, with its commerce and civility” against the Jacobin revival of Roman austerity.¹⁷⁸ Unquestionably, Burke was a supporter of the former. However, throughout his detailed critiques of the French Revolution, Burke invokes the Romans against the Jacobins. While skilled at superficial imitation, the latter acted contrary to institutional and legal

¹⁷⁶ Harold Parker. *The Cult of Antiquity and the French Revolutionaries; a Study in the Development of the Revolutionary Spirit* (New York, NY: Octagon Books, 1965) 10-36.

¹⁷⁷ Keith Baker, "Transformations of Classical Republicanism in Eighteenth-Century France." *The Journal of Modern History* 73, no. 1 (2001): 35-36.

¹⁷⁸ J. G. A. Pocock, "The Political Economy of Burke's Analysis of the French Revolution." *The Historical Journal* 25, no. 2 (1982): 344.

precedents of *Les Romains*. On the other hand, the French could claim to equal the early Romans in military ferocity. But, as far as the desirable content of Roman civilization went, the forces that opposed the Revolution were the rightful successors to the classical laurels.

I. The Revolutionary Cult of Antiquity

The imagery of classical republicanism proliferated throughout revolutionary France. *Fasces*, marble busts, and liberty caps became familiar symbols of the new republican regime. Brutus, Cicero, and Cato became standard watchwords in political debates. However, it may be said that the revolutionaries invoked antiquity more than they understood it. As Nippel asserts, the speed of events and the deluge of civil and foreign conflict prevented the revolutionary generation from adequately reflecting on and applying the lessons of antiquity to the new Republic.¹⁷⁹ Burke understood this feature of the Revolution quite well. Instead of recovering the liberty and grandeur of the ancients, they seemed only capable of repeating their mistakes. At best, the revolutionaries' could drape their zeal for innovation with togas and perform a warped pantomime of republican virtue. In reality, the *sans-culottes* reenacted and even superseded the violence and avarice of the Republic's final years.

Burke frequently invoked the demagogues of the Late Republic, Marius, Sulla, Catiline, and Cethegus, when discussing Parisian street violence and the confiscation of Church property. The National Assembly's lack of legitimacy left political questions in the hands of rival clubs compared to "whom Catiline would be thought scrupulous, and Cethegus a man of sobriety and moderation."¹⁸⁰ What distinguished the 1789 seizure of ecclesiastical property from the confiscations of Marius and Sulla was the ideological nature of the struggle. The Roman

¹⁷⁹ Wilfried Nippel, *Ancient and Modern Democracy: Two Concepts of Liberty?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 148.

¹⁸⁰ Burke, *Reflections*, 228.

extortions were motivated by “the spirit of revenge” and “the apprehension of the return to power...of those they had injured beyond all hope of forgiveness.” Anger and fear of reprisals fueled a cycle of factional recriminations in Rome that also prevented reconciliation. The expropriation of the French Church was different because of the vast magnitude of the crime (which amounted to a greater theft than the “Roman confiscators” could ever hope to complete) and, more importantly, the way it was justified. The doctrine of the “rights of man” with its powerful and universal implications comprised the most “effectual instrument of despotism.”¹⁸¹ While Burke did not deny that certain rights did exist, granted that they accommodated other demands of justice and precedent, revolutionary dogma elevated them above all other considerations, including order, antiquity, hierarchy, and virtue.¹⁸² Having attained this imperative position, the doctrine could sweep all before it and retroactively justify any crime if it served the amorphous demands of immutable rights of man and citizen.

Attempts to mimic the self-sacrificing spirit of republican virtue only resulted in profound social dissolution. Mothers and fathers accused their own children of treason, “boasting that Rome had but one Brutus, but that they could show five hundred.” Even though Lucius Junius Brutus had ordered the execution of his son to save the Republic from the Tarquin monarchy, the French devotees of virtue took this extraordinary act as a rule rather than the exception. This grossly misunderstood the wisdom of the ancients: “The wise legislators of all countries aimed at improving instincts into morals.” Accordingly, lawmakers reserved legal protections, cultural respect, and religious sanctity for familial attachments. They understood that marriage constituted the “origin of all relations, and consequently the first element of all duties.” Instead of clashing with loyalty to the larger public, family units formed the moral and

¹⁸¹ Burke, *Reflections*, 280-281.

¹⁸² Burke, *Reflections*, 217-218.

institutional framework that provided a coherent structure to public life. The indissolubility of Christian matrimony found support in the practical experience of the Romans, for whom divorce was rarely permissible.¹⁸³

Oppositely, the revolutionaries were in the habit of grafting “virtues,” in the form of Roman pantomime, onto the “vices” of their natural rights philosophy. The divorce laws of 1792 rendered the sacred covenant of matrimony a mere “civil contract” verging on “concubinage” that partners could dissolve at their pleasure. This new “system of manners” inverted all relations of blood and marriage and could only end in the “total disconnection of social life.” The “legislators of vice and crime” could not be compared with the legislators of antiquity whose institutes tended to reconcile and harmonize individuals and sub-groups within their state rather than allowing their dissolution.¹⁸⁴

This social dislocation repeated itself in the new proposal for the structure of local government. The system of “cantons, communes, and departments” erased ancient boundaries that had structured French life for centuries. The newly instituted communities would form “without any civil habitudes or connections.” Judges, tax collectors, and priests would find themselves in arbitrarily assembled districts and parishes, with whose inhabitants they had little acquaintance. The situation resembled the declining veteran colonies that Burke had described in *An Abridgment*. According to Tacitus, the early emperors settled retired soldiers with their old legionary comrades, laying the “foundations of civil discipline in the military” organization. However, they soon abandoned this policy, assuming that regimental affiliation would not impact colonial settlement. This was a grave miscalculation motivated by the Late Empire’s tendency to see its subjects as equal and undifferentiated.¹⁸⁵ Without the structure of their previous

¹⁸³ Burke, “First Letter on Regicide Peace,” 127-129.

¹⁸⁴ Burke, “First Letter on Regicide Peace,” 129.

¹⁸⁵ Burke, *Reflections*, 354.

attachments, the settlements quickly resembled more of a “crowd rather than a colony.”¹⁸⁶ In principle, the organization of localities should reflect pre-political constitutive groups of society. The “soul of a true republic” resided in this fact. Without recognizing this, *liberté* and *égalité* would undercut *fraternité*.¹⁸⁷

These problems—the vicious factionalism, corroding family structures, and arbitrary associational life—all worked against the substance of the Roman Republic at its zenith. Instead, Revolutionary France experienced its own process of civic decay on a compressed timeline. Like the “degenerated and worn out republics” before it, this “new commonwealth” had been born with the “symptoms of death.”¹⁸⁸ If Burke had no trouble equating Parisian street violence with the civil strife of Marius and Sulla, it likewise would not have been hard to imagine Caesar’s eventual appearance on the scene. As civil institutions collapsed, the military would find itself the only effective power in an increasingly chaotic society. All it would take, as Burke presciently anticipated, was “some popular general, who understands the art of conciliating the soldiery” and in possession of “the true spirit of command” to make himself “master of your whole republic.” According to *An Abridgment*, all of these qualities could have been attributed to Caesar. Of course, English history had its own seventeenth-century version of this story in the figure of Cromwell, who Burke also mentioned earlier in *Reflections*.¹⁸⁹ Whether Burke drew on Roman or English history in making this judgment hardly matters since they are not mutually exclusive options. Burke cites both historical traditions throughout *Reflections*. As a rule, he did not confine his historical references to particular traditions. According to Sato, Burke often used

¹⁸⁶ Tacitus, *The Collected Works of Tacitus*, “The Annals,” Book XIV, 27.

¹⁸⁷ Burke, *Reflections*, 353-354.

¹⁸⁸ Burke, *Reflections*, 354.

¹⁸⁹ Burke, *Reflections*, 204.

European history as a frame of reference for his interpretation of the English.¹⁹⁰ Either Caesar or Cromwell fit the bill.

II. The New Roman Senate:

Despite the internal convulsions unleashed by the Revolution, the new Republic's aggressive posture in European affairs shocked Burke. Throughout his writing on the Revolution and its aftermath, Burke accuses the revolutionary governments of imitating the ruthless expansionist policies of the early Roman Republic. As Burke had long known, this was one of Roman history's bloodiest and most rapacious periods, even as republican institutions flourished. Decades earlier in *The Vindication of Natural Society*, he aggregated the body count of conquests from this period:

This Empire, whilst in its Infancy, began by an Effusion of human Blood scarcely credible. The neighbouring little States teemed for new Destruction: The *Sabines*, the *Samnites*, the *Æqui*, the *Volsci*, the *Hetrurians*, were broken by a Series of Slaughters which had no Interruption, for some hundreds of Years; Slaughters which upon all sides consumed more than two Millions of the wretched People. The *Gauls* rushing into *Italy* about this Time, added the total Destruction of their own Armies to those of the ancient Inhabitants. In short, it were hardly possible to conceive a more horrid and bloody Picture, if that which the *Punic Wars* that ensued soon after did not present one, that far exceeds it. Here we find that Climax of Devastation, and Ruin, which seemed to shake the whole Earth. The Extent of this War which vexed so many Nations, and both Elements, and the Havock of the human Species caused in both, really astonishes beyond Expression, when it is nakedly considered, and those Matters which are apt to divert our Attention from it, the Characters, Actions, and Designs of the Persons concerned, are not taken into the Account. These Wars, I mean those called the *Punic Wars*, could not have stood the human Race in less than three Millions of the Species [sic].¹⁹¹

Though *A Vindication* was written in an intentionally overwrought and satirical style to parody religious free-thinkers, Burke nevertheless was deeply aware of the destructive side of Roman ambition. The source of this extraordinary form of violence originated in the nature of republican government, which required the mobilization of the entire people for total war. As Burke had argued in *An Abridgment*, “one uniform spirit animated” the body politic for centuries. In each

¹⁹⁰ Sato, *Edmund Burke as Historian*, 10-11

¹⁹¹ Burke, *A Vindication of the Natural Society*, 13.

conflict, whether with the Latins, Volscis, Samnites, or Carthaginians, “the war was so prosecuted as if the republic could not subsist, unless that particular enemy were totally destroyed.”¹⁹² This same existential and mass-mobilizing republican warfare was found in the progress of French troops through Italy and the Low Countries. The new regime could be described as a “martial republick [sic]” where the state—“one and indivisible”—dominated all aspects of civic life.¹⁹³ It was “military in its principle, in its maxims, in its spirit, and in all of its movements.” All of its “dreadful energy” coursed toward “the production of force” and “the dominion of minds by proselytism, and of bodies by arms.”¹⁹⁴

Therefore, it is less of a surprise that Burke dubbed the Directory on several occasions as the “new Roman Senate” than it may appear at first.¹⁹⁵ Burke had criticized the unicameral National Assembly for lacking a more aristocratic chamber that would restrain its democratic impulses.¹⁹⁶ However, by 1796, Burke had decided that the ancient Senate provided a “perpetual model for conduct towards other nations.”¹⁹⁷ Paris “followed, as they always affect to do, and have hitherto done with success, the example of the ancient Romans.”¹⁹⁸ Among the German states, French ambassadors treated their princely hosts to arrogant diplomacy while at the same time “circulating mutinous manifestos” to provoke domestic dissent.¹⁹⁹ Both states acted as international arbiters of justice, shaking “all governments by listening to the complaints of their subjects, and soon after brought the kings themselves to answer at their bar.”²⁰⁰ Both republics overthrew some kings to show their commitment to universal liberation and subordinated others,

¹⁹² Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 203.

¹⁹³ Burke, “Fourth Letter on Regicide Peace,” 317.

¹⁹⁴ Burke, “Second Letter on Regicide Peace,” 183, 182.

¹⁹⁵ Burke, *Further Reflections*, “Thoughts on French Affairs,” 254.

¹⁹⁶ Burke, *Reflections*, 367-368.

¹⁹⁷ Burke, “Fourth Letter on Regicide Peace,” 339.

¹⁹⁸ Burke, “Fourth Letter on Regicide Peace,” 342.

¹⁹⁹ Burke, *Further Reflections*, “Thoughts on French Affairs,” 254.

²⁰⁰ Burke, “Fourth Letter on Regicide Peace,” 342.

to make a point of their power. Burke quotes Tacitus once more, who remarked, “*ut habeant instrumenta servitutis et reges.*”²⁰¹ Of course, as Montesquieu had demonstrated, this policy was often a self-serving means of imperial expansion.²⁰² The same had come to pass in Europe with the King of Prussia and the Emperor of Austria slowly acquiescing to vassal status as the client-kings of Cappadocia and Judaea had done before them.²⁰³

Burke claimed that, in part, Roman history, when juxtaposed with past failures of Louis XIV and Louis XV, had inspired this change in French diplomacy and statecraft. Many French statesmen and diplomats attributed the continual failure of their country’s foreign policies to the absolutist form of rule. The monarchy was “a system of government too variable for any regular plan of national aggrandizement.” Over the reigns of three sovereigns, the “vicissitudes” wrought by their divergent characters and “the different views and inclinations belonging to youth, manhood, and age” shattered the consistency of imperial grand strategy. Louis XIV had lost Europe due to the efforts of Lord Marlborough in the War of the Spanish Succession. Under the woeful leadership of Louis XV, the Seven Years War bankrupted and deprived France of her overseas possessions while allying with the hated Austrians. Humiliation piled on humiliation, culminating in the debt crisis of the late 1780s that triggered the Revolution.²⁰⁴

The exasperated French strategists, now empowered by the rapid dissolution of the Crown’s authority after 1789, turned instead to Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy* and Montesquieu’s *Reflections on the Causes of the Grandeur and Decline of the Romans* for guidance. Both of these works depicted the Romans acting according to consistent and

²⁰¹ Burke, “Fourth Letter on Regicide Peace,” 340. See Tacitus, “Agricola” 685. “So was maintained the ancient and long recognized practice of the Roman people, which seeks to secure among the instruments of dominion even kings themselves.”

²⁰² Montesquieu, *The Complete Works, Vol. III*, “Considerations on the Causes of the Grandeur and Declension of the Roman Empire,” 38-39.

²⁰³ Burke, “Fourth Letter on Regicide Peace,” 344.

²⁰⁴ Burke, “Third Letter on Regicide Peace,” 175.

“systematic” strategies of imperial expansion. The republican guarantee of popular accountability and separated powers ensured that foreign policy was not subject to the whims and caprices of the monarch. Consequently, the Romans at their height annexed more territory in a single year than France had in two hundred.²⁰⁵ The stark contrast in foreign policy outcomes between the republican and monarchical forms of government was enough to discredit the latter utterly. Republicanism, not monarchy, could successfully drive French power to the paramountcy of European great power relations.

Powered by the delusions of universal ideology and the mass-mobilization of its population, France stood poised to upset the European balance of power and remake the continent in its own image. She would establish miniature and like-minded republics at strategic points around Europe to act as “garrisons” of French power.²⁰⁶ The remaining monarchies would have no choice but to sue for peace and await their eventual extermination. Only then would perpetual peace reign from the Atlantic to the Baltic. However, to secure this *Pax Gallica*, France would have to make war on a scale that eclipsed traditional European conflicts over the balance of power. She would ignore the rules that once governed the conduct of war and diplomacy. As Burke predicted a few years earlier, “The hell-hounds of war, on all sides, will be uncoupled and unmuzzled...Such is the approaching golden age, which the Virgil of your Assembly has sung to his Pollios!”²⁰⁷ Instead of a new age of Saturn, the ascent of France would mean unrestrained bloodshed without parallel in European history.

As pressing as the threat from the “republick of assassins” was, Burke found its outward attempts at appropriating the grandeur of the Roman Republic laughable and artificial.²⁰⁸ The

²⁰⁵ Burke, “Third Letter on Regicide Peace,” 175-176.

²⁰⁶ Burke, “Third Letter on Regicide Peace,” 248.

²⁰⁷ Burke, *Further Reflections*, “A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly,” 55-56

²⁰⁸ Burke, “First Letter on Regicide Peace,” 73.

Directory, which had outgrown the rough Jacobinism of the Reign of Terror, now appeared in gaudy style “perfumed and ribbanded and sashed and plumed... more insolent in their fine cloathes [sic].” Their outlandish garb sought to emulate the finery of Roman senators, but they instead came off merely as actors of the stage. Burke recalled a conversation with his friend—“the first of Actors”—David Garrick. He had asked why “whenever a Senate appeared on Stage, the Audience seemed always disposed to laughter?” Garrick replied that the audience knew well that the noble senators appearing before them were no more than “candle-snuffers,” “scene-shifters,” and “clerks.” The juxtaposition of the “vileness of the Actors with the pomp of the Habits excited ideas of contempt and ridicule.”²⁰⁹ The superficiality of the display revealed the true chasm between the revolutionaries and the wisdom of the ancients.

Burke partly anticipates Marx’s observation on the French Revolution that “in the austere classical traditions of the Roman Republic the bourgeois gladiators found the ideals and the art forms, the self-deceptions, that they needed to conceal from themselves the bourgeois-limited content of their struggles and to keep their passion on the high plane of great historic tragedy.”²¹⁰ Though Burke did not see the Revolution as the advent of bourgeois society, the extravagant spectacle of neoclassicism underscored that the Revolutionaries were venturing blindly into a major transformation whose destructive consequences they did not comprehend. The rote invocations of Brutus and Cato disguised the truly monstrous and novel phantom rising from the streets of Paris.

²⁰⁹ Burke, “Fourth Letter on Regicide Peace,” 340.

²¹⁰ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (Marxists Internet Archive, 1999), 2.

III. A Classical Counterrevolution

If the parallel between Jacobin France and Republican Rome was a spurious one, the true heir of Roman greatness and virtue was the “ancient, civil, moral, and political order of Europe.”²¹¹ Whereas the French had grown enamored with Rousseau and his “paradoxes,” the British continued to read the “sound authors of antiquity.”²¹² Considering Burke’s emphasis on the gradual development of British institutions over the centuries, beginning with the Saxons and Normans, as well as his fondness for the “age of chivalry,” Rome’s role might appear irrelevant to the identity of the British kingdom and Europe at large.²¹³ Similarly, his reference to the French constitution as a “noble and venerable castle” would suggest Gothic or Frankish origins for continental political institutions.²¹⁴ However, the idea of Rome grows in importance for Burke because of the pan-European nature of the French Revolution’s civilizational challenge. To resist the onslaught, Burke needed to reflect on the common spirit and underlying institutional structures that formed the community of Europe—a community that necessarily excluded the regicidal regime.

Europe, though a group of independent states, was a sort of “Commonwealth” bound by “the same basis of general law” though “some diversity of provincial customs and local establishments” existed. The most obvious source of European unity was the Christian religion. Burke downplayed doctrinal differences between the Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox faiths, claiming that they “agree[d] in the fundamental parts, varying a little in the ceremonies and in the subordinate doctrines.” Legal and economic institutions owed their origin to the customs of the Germanic tribes that replaced the Roman Empire. Laws of feudal ownership and obligation

²¹¹ Burke, “Second Letter on Regicide Peace,” 157.

²¹² Burke, *Further Reflections*, “A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly,” 53.

²¹³ Burke, *Reflections*, 239.

²¹⁴ Burke, *Reflections*, 185.

directly descended from this establishment. And yet, beneath the vaults of the Christian religion and the buttresses of feudal and Germanic “customary” resided the solid marble foundation of the Roman Law, which brought a sense of “system and discipline” to the tangled labyrinth of Gothic conventions.²¹⁵ While the continuity of the Roman law’s influence had been ruptured by the fall of the Empire, it had been fortuitously rediscovered and “regenerated” in Bologna during the eleventh century.²¹⁶ Even England, with its indigenous common law traditions, still retained the stamp of Roman law through the canon and admiralty courts.²¹⁷

The organic incorporation of these three legacies—Christian, Roman, and Germanic—constituted Europe’s body politic. Its “classes, orders, and distinctions” embodied by the nobility, the gentry, the burgesses, guilds, and established churches framed a shared political culture.²¹⁸ Britain had its Parliament, Spain its *Cortes*, France its *Estates General*, and the Holy Roman Empire its Diet. Even accounting for the different constitutional trajectories of European states, the basic structure of this corporate social order remained. A common “system of manners and education” had grown on this edifice, sustained by the universities, and ensuring that “no citizen of Europe could altogether be an exile in any part of it.”²¹⁹ The order ensured a remarkable degree of liberty since it included the “greatest possible variety” of social institutions and ends, reflecting the make-up of society rather than the “unity of design” desired by the state. For this reason, though it owed its origin in part to the Romans, the commonwealth of Europe outclassed all of the “ancient commonwealths.”²²⁰ Similarly, the order depended on a balance of

²¹⁵ Burke, “First Letter on Regicide Peace,” 133.

²¹⁶ Burke, “Third Letter on Regicide Peace,” 228.

²¹⁷ Iain Hampsher-Monk “Edmund Burke's Changing Justification for Intervention.” *The Historical Journal* 48, no. 1 (2005): 97.

²¹⁸ Burke, “First Letter on Regicide Peace,” 133.

²¹⁹ Hampsher-Monk, “Edmund Burke's Changing Justification for Intervention,” 97

²²⁰ Burke, “Second Letter on Regicide Peace,” 180.

power between its component kingdoms rather than, as in Rome, the hegemony of a central sovereign.

If the European commonwealth was a distinct “juridico-cultural entity,” then there must be a legal basis on which to condemn France.²²¹ When applied to inter-state relations, the Roman law principle of “vicinage” was particularly useful to Burke in justifying British intervention in Europe. As he maintained, “There is a *Law of Neighbourhood*, which does not leave a man a perfect master on his own ground. When a neighbor sees a *new erection*, in the nature of a nuisance, set up at his door, he has a right to represent it to a judge.” By extension, France’s neighbors held an abiding interest in the form of her government because it intimately affected their future security. Since there was no judge to appeal to in international disputes, Britain and her allies would enforce the “civil vicinity” of Europe themselves and install a legitimate government.²²²

The invocation of Roman themes similarly appears in Burke’s attempts to rally support for foreign political figures generally reviled by his British audience: the Papacy and French Monarchy. In the fevered political imagination of Protestant Whigs, these continental despots conjured images of absolutism and superstition. However, by draping them in the mantle of classical antiquity, Burke sought to evoke whatever sympathy he could. In Burke’s famous description in *Reflections* of the plight of Queen Marie Antoinette, a passage often cited as evidence of Burke’s gothic sensibilities, he nonetheless clings to eighteenth-century neoclassicism. Despite her captivity by the Parisians, the queen displayed “the dignity of a Roman matron.”²²³ This linked her to notable women of antiquity like Lucretia or Virginia. Both of them had nobly resisted the sexual advances of tyrants to defend the honor of their families

²²¹ Hampsher-Monk “Edmund Burke's Changing Justification for Intervention,” 97.

²²² Burke, “First Letter on Regicide Peace,” 136.

²²³ Burke, *Reflections*, 237-239.

and the Republic.²²⁴ Burke's friend Philip Francis, to whom he had sent an early draft, criticized this passage as "pure foppery." He argued that if Burke wished to compare the queen figures from antiquity, Antoinette most resembled the scheming and sybaritic Messalina, the wife of Emperor Claudius.²²⁵ Burke countered to Francis that he doubted the veracity of the charges against the queen and added that even if the French court possessed a sleazy reputation, this did not outweigh the inherent sympathy a reasonable person ought to feel for an unfortunate queen.

As Burke put it, citing *Hamlet* and Homer:

Are not high rank, great splendour of descent, great personal elegance and outward accomplishments, ingredients of moment in forming the interest we take in the misfortunes of men? The minds of those who do not feel thus, are not even systematically right. 'What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, that he should weep for her'? Why? Because she was Hecuba, the Queen of Troy, the wife of Priam and suffered, in the close of life, a thousand calamities! I felt too for Hecuba...and I never inquired into the anecdotes of the Court or City of Troy, before I gave way to the sentiments which the author wished to inspire.²²⁶

The tragedy of the situation rather than the character of the queen was the issue here. One need not recount the virtues of a victim to prove the injustice of their malefactors, But, in resorting to this argument, Burke did not need to invoke Antoinette's matronly virtues. His shift from Roman to Greek imagery makes this tension in his argument explicit. Yet, in any case, Burke never conceded that the queen's actions had been in the wrong.

Burke also marshaled similar neo-Roman imagery in support of Pope Pius VI against the French incursion into Italy. He described the Holy Father as a defenseless, yet proud, figure situated among the picturesque ruins of the Eternal City like a latter-day *princeps*:

That venerable potentate and pontiff, is sunk deep into the vale of years; he is half dis-armed by his peaceful character; his dominions are more than half disarmed by a peace of two hundred years, defended as they were, not by force but by reverence; yet in all these straits, we see him display, amidst the recent ruins and the new defacements of his plundered capital, along with the mild and decorated piety of the modern, all the spirit and magnanimity of ancient Rome?²²⁷

²²⁴ Philip Hicks, "The Roman Matron in Britain: Female Political Influence and Republican Response, Ca. 1750–1800." *The Journal of Modern History* 77, no. 1 (2005): 63.

²²⁵ Edmund Burke, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke, Vol. VI*, "Philip Francis to Edmund Burke, 19 February 1790," 86-87.

²²⁶ Edmund Burke, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke, Vol. VI*, "To Philip Francis, 20 February 1790," 89-90.

²²⁷ Burke, "Third Letter on Regicide Peace," 227.

The Pope, in his dignified resistance to the French invaders, exemplifies the courage expected of any Roman statesman or general. It is a Christian valor in that it is pacific. But, this does not make it any less magnanimous than the more warlike *virtus* of the Ancient Romans. Burke also compares Pius VI's successful infrastructure projects with those of the Roman Emperors, who, "though with an enthralled world to labor for them," had failed to drain the Pontine Marshes. Thus, even though Burke considers Roman virtue a beneficent trait, the persons who possess it can surpass its boundaries.

Britain itself becomes a kind of latter-day avatar of old Rome. Burke superimposes the ancient city's civic geography onto the British Isles, imbuing his calls for a proactive anti-revolutionary foreign policy with a sense of dignity and destiny. The Britons must "stretch their thoughts beyond the *pomoerium* of England," the sacred boundary marking the city of Rome's limits.²²⁸ At the crescendo of *Letter to a Noble Lord*, Burke compares Windsor Castle to not only the Temple of Jerusalem but also the Capitoline Hill: "Amen! and so be it: and so it will be, *Dum domus Aeneae Capitoli immobile saxum / Accolet; imperiumque pater Romanus habebit.*"²²⁹ Through such rhetorical linkages, the cause of Europe could trace its ancestry back to the glories of Rome.

While the Roman past fulfilled the need for a common counterrevolutionary identity, it also offered some guidance for defeating the Revolution. What the salvation of Europe desperately required was an infusion of classical virtue to counteract the pseudo-Roman ambitions of the regicides. Just as the Roman Republic fought with an existential ferocity, so too must the states of Christendom. Their *casus belli* did not lie in the particular "conduct" of the

²²⁸ Burke, "Fourth Letter on Regicide Peace," 321.

²²⁹ Burke, *Further Reflections*, "Letter to a Noble Lord," 310. See Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book IX, 534-536. "As long as the house of Aeneas dwells on the immovable rock of the Capitol, / and the father of Rome maintains his authority."

French Republic but rather its bare “existence” as an aspiring hegemon.²³⁰ The defenders of the old order of Europe needed what Burke called “true republican spirit.” This was “of the same nature” as the enthusiastic “zeal” for innovation that animated the revolutionaries. But, “true republican spirit” was different from its imitators in that it was “informed by another principle and point[ed] to another end.” It was not defined by a zeal for “novelty” but rather conservation. It was this zealotry that had spurred the Maccabees to defend their laws and temples and had likewise “animated the distinguished heroes and patriots of old.”²³¹ The sentiments stirred by the invocation of “God, king, and country” could be just as strong, if not more so, than the passions awakened by the cries of “liberty, equality, and fraternity.”

“True republican spirit” worked on two levels. On the first, it was needed to defeat the incursions of the Regicide Republic abroad, resembling a restrained and yet effective form of warfare. It was vital that the British upper classes, who composed the officer corps, possessed classical military temperance. Fabius Maximus and Scipio Africanus, who were preeminent among the Roman generals during the Second Punic War, exemplified this self-control. Fabius knew the right conditions in which to retreat and advance, to “delay” as well as to vanquish. Like the “black cloud” that floats innocuously over the mountains and suddenly descends upon the plains as a tempest, he successfully exhausted Hannibal’s invasion of Italy. Scipio Africanus—“the thunderbolt of war”—mastered himself to such an extent that he could “endure the severest trial that a gallant spirit could undergo.” In his daring invasions of Spain and North Africa, he “assume[d] that most awful moral responsibility of deciding when victory may be too dearly purchased by the loss of a single life, and when the safety and glory of their country may demand the certain sacrifice of thousands.”²³²

²³⁰ Burke, “Second Letter on Regicide Peace,” 155.

²³¹ Burke, *Further Reflections*, “Letter to William Eliott,” 273-274.

²³² Burke, “Third Letter on Regicide Peace,” 269-270.

Both men, though their tactics differed, possessed “a cool, steady deliberate principle; always present, always equable; having no connexion with anger; incited, invigorated by a generous love of fame; informed, moderated, and directed by an enlarged knowledge of its publick ends...[sic].”²³³ Put differently, the Roman generals were monuments to self-control, moderation, and selflessness within the difficult moral and strategic environment of military conflict. Scipio and Fabius also proved wise statesmen. Their classical prudence, though spirited, possessed a restraint from extremes of the faux-Roman spirit of the revolutionaries. While he was resolute in advocating for regime change in Paris, Burke warned against hypothetical plans to divide France into several states in the aftermath of the conflict. Aside from Cato the Censor and his famous cry of *Carthago delenda est*, “Provident patriots did not think it good for Rome, that even Carthage should be quite destroyed.”²³⁴ Unquestionably, they must remove the Directory from their seats in Luxembourg Palace and defeat their armies of conscripts. However, the “dismemberment” of France as a political entity would seriously disrupt the continental balance of power and shatter the “general liberty and independence of the great Christian commonwealth of Europe.”²³⁵ Such a move would only make sense if every other major power were similarly partitioned. Salting the fields of Champagne would differ little from the Directory’s fanatical plans of universal empire.

On the second, “true republican spirit” was needed on the domestic front. Fabius and Scipio had manifested their “more exalted and refined courage in council.”²³⁶ In particular, courage was needed to prevent “Monarchs or Senates or popular Assemblies, under pretences of dignity or authority, or freedom, to shake off those moral riders which reason has appointed to

²³³ Burke, “Third Letter on Regicide Peace,” 269.

²³⁴ Burke, *Further Reflections*, “Letter to a Member of the National Assembly,” 42-43.

²³⁵ Burke, “Fourth Letter on Regicide Peace,” 325

²³⁶ Burke, “Third Letter on Regicide Peace,” 269.

govern every sort of rude power [sic].” In other words, in case institutions failed to maintain their authority and submitted to the radical doctrines, individual patriots would have no choice but to restore the natural order themselves. This contrasted with the spirit of novelty, which encouraged the total destruction of established institutions, “evok[ing] the powers of hell to rectify the disorders of the earth.” The spirit of conservation, on the other hand, called for “justice and wisdom and fortitude from heaven, for the correction of human vice, and the recalling of human error...[sic]”²³⁷ It felt no need to engage in societal reconstruction along the lines of abstract theory and the bloodletting that necessarily attended such ventures. Instead, it sought to maintain or restore the proper order of things when it was imperiled.

Burke’s yearning for the deliverance of heroes in the Roman mold reflects deeper changes in his view of history. By the end of his life, Burke embraced a more contingent view of history from his earlier outlook, which emphasized the steady and incremental development of institutions and manners.²³⁸ While he continued to maintain that progress was possible, the tumultuous 1790s had shown that it was not as straightforward or guaranteed as he had previously thought: “I doubt whether the history of man is yet complete enough, if ever it can be so, to furnish grounds for a sure theory on the internal causes which necessarily affect the fortune of a state.”²³⁹ Instead, he reflected on the importance of time and chance in shaping history:

The death of a man at a critical juncture, his disgust, his retreat, his disgrace, have brought innumerable calamities on a whole nation. A common soldier, a child, a girl at the door of an inn, have changed the face of fortune, and almost of Nature.²⁴⁰

Consequently, the old order could no longer blindly depend on the effectiveness of its institutions. Instead, they faltered and weighed the possibilities of peace with a regicide power. Even the most ancient constitution like “an awful and imposing” castle could be breached if its

²³⁷ Burke, “Letter to William Eliott,” 274.

²³⁸ Weston, “Edmund Burke’s View of History,” 227.

²³⁹ Burke, “First Letter on Regicide Peace,” 63.

²⁴⁰ Burke, “First Letter on Regicide Peace,” 64.

defenders lacked the requisite spirit. Alternatively, “miserable works have been defended by the constancy of the garrison,” and “Weather-beaten ships have been brought safe to port by the spirit and alertness of their crew.”²⁴¹ If the Christian commonwealth of Europe were to survive, it would require determined guardians. Not knowing whether to trust in the course of history, Burke thought it best to place his slender hopes in the capacities and talents of exceptional warriors and statesmen. In them, the flame of Fabius and Scipio might still be found.

CONCLUSION: Burke’s Two Romes

²⁴¹ Burke, “Fourth Letter on Regicide Peace,” 384-385.

Burke's thoughts on Roman civilization appear—quite fittingly—Janus-faced. In *An Abridgment*, he praised the sons of Romulus as the “legislators of mankind.”²⁴² Decades after the latter's publication, in *A Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe* he condemned the spawn of the Tiber as “the grand oppressors of mankind” unworthy even in comparison to the venal Irish Parliament.²⁴³ Yet, whether he judged their achievements positively or negatively, Burke was reasonably certain that the Romans left a deeply ingrained legacy to the whole world. Jupiter's promise in the *Aeneid* of “Eternal Empire, world without end” had, in this sense, been kept.²⁴⁴

The Romans as legislators appear scattered haphazardly throughout Burke's writings. In certain respects, they were ideal Burkean conservatives—as devoted to their ancestors as they were to posterity. Their sober obedience to the divine permeated every aspect of their society, even if Burke disagreed with its content. A remarkable corporate spirit ascended upwards through the major institutions from the family to the assemblies and to the military and high politics, allowing the Romans to develop a civic, self-sacrificing identity. Their constitution mixed and balanced popular and elite claims to authority and strengthened the citizen's attachments to their “little platoons,” allowing for a symbiotic relationship between the whole and parts. This exemplified an enduring

²⁴²Burke, “An Essay toward an Abridgment of English History,” 320.

²⁴³ Burke, “A Letter To Sir Hercules Langrishe On The Catholics Of Ireland,” 129.

²⁴⁴ Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book I, 334.

truth for Burke; states are not simply aggregations of atomic individuals, but a “body politick [sic]” and a “moral essence” bound within by natural human associations.²⁴⁵

Under their Empire, law, arts, and commerce took root across Europe, leaving behind the groundwork for the shared European civilization that Burke esteemed so highly. Most crucially in Burke’s thought, this Rome lives on for Burke in his quest to improve the British Empire and resist the French Revolution.

The Romans as oppressors are most visible in *An Abridgment* and the *Letters on Regicide Peace*. Here, the Romans show themselves as incredibly adept in the arts of conquest and plunder. Raised in the fury of Bronze Age Italy, the Romans obtained a military strength that outclassed all of its neighbors and rivals and allowed them to dominate the Mediterranean and reap their extortionate rewards. The ghost of this Rome was summoned by the Jacobins and Directory when they declared their intention to renovate the whole of Europe by force and dissolve the ancient and oppressive tyrannies of the old world.

The tension between these two visions is as powerful as it is difficult to explain since it would imply that the achievements of the Romans were constructed upon a sordid foundation. However, this Manichaeian view could never fit into Burke’s moral imagination. The brutal side of Rome was undeniable, and Burke never shrank from condemning it when faced with its transgressions. But, its crimes, though great, were not peculiar to them as a people but rather a constant historical phenomenon that reflected man’s fallen nature.

We do not draw the moral lessons we might from history. On the contrary, without care it may be used to vitiate our minds and to destroy our happiness. In history a great volume is unrolled for our instruction, drawing the materials of future wisdom from the past errors

²⁴⁵ Burke, “First Letter on Regicide Peace,” 139.

and infirmities of mankind...History consists for the greater part of the miseries brought upon the world by pride, ambition, avarice, revenge, lust, sedition, hypocrisy, ungoverned zeal, and all the train of disorderly appetites which shake the public with the same “troublous storms that toss. The private state, and render life unsweet.” These vices are the causes of those storms. Religion, morals, laws, prerogatives, privileges, liberties, rights of men are the pretexts. The pretexts are always found in some specious appearance of a real good. You would not secure men from tyranny and sedition by rooting out of the mind the principles to which these fraudulent pretexts apply? If you did, you would root out everything that is valuable in the human breast [sic].²⁴⁶

Thus, it would be foolish to reject the whole inheritance of the Roman legislators because it had been implicated in condemnable behavior. Of course, as the French example demonstrated, this would be no reason to repeat past mistakes and cruelties either in the name of ignorance or Revolution. Instead, Burke viewed history as an opportunity to “submit to the dominion of prudence and virtue...the feudal tenure which they cannot alter.”²⁴⁷

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²⁴⁶ Burke, *Reflections*, 310-311.

²⁴⁷ Burke, “Letter to William Eliott,” 274.

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