

# DOMESTIC EFFECTS OF ROMAN EXPANSION

## LATIN 215: The Crisis of the Roman Republic

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In a scant 130 years moved from city-state to empire. In the process Roman cultural life became much more varied and sophisticated as a result but the expansion had revolutionary effects on the economic, social, political and ethical life of the Roman people.

### AGRICULTURE

One of most spectacular transformations. Movement from yeoman farmers (the noble farmer of Cato the Elder's *De Agricultura* – and Thomas Jefferson) on small, family farms to centralized, sprawling agribusiness (*latifundia*). The depredations of Hannibal's 14 years in Italy had devastated these farms; irrigation broke down and malaria returned to many areas, further depleting the already damaged rural population. This resulted in flight to city.

Significant human losses: 285,000 before 1<sup>st</sup> Punic War -> 214,000 by 203 BCE -> 144,000 by 193 (a phenomenon that mimics the collapse of Sparta three centuries before). The losses could have been restored within a generation BUT conquest of Mediterranean had disrupted the economic equilibrium of Roman society. Expansion had opened Italy to competition from producers in conquered provinces like Sardinia, Sicily, and Africa. Moreover, wars of conquest created massive supply of cheap labor (slaves) and encouraged the cultivation of cash crops that need year-round attention and the simplest cultivation techniques (i.e. olive & grape)

***Latifundia* –um:** large-scale, capital intensive operations specializing in one or more cash crops; required: abundant capital and land, cheap labor, special equipment, efficient organization and management, and expanding markets.

### URBAN GROWTH AND THE POOR

Pressure on small farmers led to a flight to the burgeoning urban commercial centers that outstripped the ancient economies ability to produce jobs. Poor settled in large apartment blocks (*insulae*) in conditions of poor sanitation.

Situation at Rome particularly acute; the rapid growth of the city did not rest on any productive base but was inflated by plunder from conquest. After the destruction of Carthage, no profitable wars for some time, and those wars that did occur were costly (Spanish guerillas, Sicilian slave revolt) => serious depression of the city's economy.

### DECLINE OF MILITARY STRENGTH

As landowners fled to the city, fewer citizens met the minimum property qualifications for service in the Roman army => military weakness. Tribunes interfered with levees and harassed returning generals with prosecution. Anti-recruitment riots in 144 BCE, In 138 BCE, tribunes imprisoned the two consuls to prevent them from drafting more troops.

### WIDESPREAD DISCONTENT AND SLAVE REVOLTS

Between 201 and 136 BCE, most states in the East had lost between 20 and 25% of their population due to war and enslavement. Massive economic depression in the East.

Slave revolts: until this period, the number of slaves in Rome was small – usually restricted to assistants who lived and worked alongside their masters. Now, large numbers of anonymous chattel slaves were put to work in forests, mines, and fields of great landlords under terrible conditions => rise of slave revolts. The first occurred in 138 BCE. Particularly long and savage in Sicily.

## **EQUITES**

Other groups also unhappy with the status quo. *Equites*, “knights” *ordo equester*: wealthy non-senatorial landowners, such as those from Italy who had attained Roman citizenship. Interests more commercial than senators but impossible to distinguish between the two groups on purely economic grounds BUT they were different enough that their interests often conflicted with the bulk of the senatorial elite.

## **FREEDMEN**

Number increased with the increase in slavery. More than any other ancient people, Romans were willing to free slaves (either on death of master, as reward for great service, or by earning their *peculium*, i.e. buying their own freedom). The prospect of freedom encouraged slaves to be docile and work hard. When freed, they become the clients of the patron and expected to assist their patron in any way they could. Enrolled in one of populous 4 urban tribes => their vote was diluted compared to the rural citizens.

## **ITALIAN ALLIES**

As Rome became more secure in Italy, their treatment of the Italian allies became more heavy-handed. In 186 BCE, Rome sought to suppress Bacchic Cults throughout Italy, a dangerous interference in what had before been a right of the allies to domestic freedom.

## **POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS**

### **Senate**

Wars of expansion had the effect of increasing and entrenching the power of the senatorial aristocracy, i.e. wealthy aristocratic landowners. A few powerful families monopolized the office of consul and the other upper magistracies.

### **Prorogation**

Expansion of extending a consul's or praetor's military command or provincial governorship for more than the normal term of office. (Promagistrates)

Unchecked by external pressure, nobility competed with increasing intensity for glory for themselves and their families: *Gloria, dignitas, auctoritas*

As the rewards for political office increased, so did the temptation to bend or break custom to attain them. The shared set of values necessary for a Republican form of government gradually eroded under the combined ambitions of generations of politicians. For example, Scipio Africanus, although never holding any position above the aedileship, was granted proconsular command after his uncle and father had been killed in Spain. Won the consulship in 206 despite being far younger than tradition demanded and never having held the praetorship.