

# H-Net Reviews

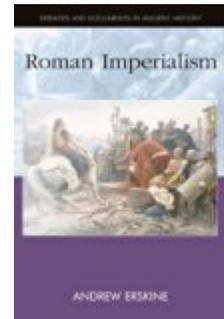
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andrew Erskine. *Roman Imperialism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010. xxiv + 208 pp. \$115.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7486-1962-7; \$37.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7486-1963-4.

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Published on H-War (December, 2012)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



Andrew Erskine's *Roman Imperialism* provides an overview of how and why the city-state of Rome conquered the Mediterranean world. The book is divided into two main parts. The first presents a survey of recent approaches and issues, and the second gives a selection of ancient sources in translation. The book will be very useful to the undergraduate reader who wants to understand the political and social causes and consequences of Roman expansion, but it does not offer much to the student of the Roman military.

The first half of the book is divided into five chapters. The first chapter states the aim of the book, which is to explain "how [the Roman] empire was acquired, conceived and maintained and how the subject responded to it" (p. 1). Erskine also discusses Rome's own terminology for "empire" and gives an overview of the primary sources on the topic.

The second chapter offers a chronological survey of Rome's conquests, starting with its domination of Italy and concluding with the major territorial acquisitions under the empire. Erskine is correct to point out that the majority of Rome's conquests took place during the period of the Republic (509-30 BC), but he treats the empire (30 BC-AD 476) in a cursory manner, mentioning in passing Claudius's conquest of Britain and Trajan's campaigns in Dacia. Erskine relegates Roman imperial history to the sidelines, which is perhaps necessary, given the nature of our surviving sources and the demand for brevity. Readers wanting a detailed examination of the empire will have to look elsewhere.

The third chapter is particularly valuable and discusses various explanations that have been offered by ancient and modern scholars for what motivated the

Romans to undertake wars of conquest. Erskine's historiographic overview is thoughtful, and his criticisms of the scholarship are on point but usually not heavy-handed. He outlines the three main approaches that modern scholars have used to explain Roman expansion: wars to defend Rome and its allies, the militarism of Roman politics and society, and war for economic gain. He most sharply criticizes the so-called defensive imperialists, the most important of whom, he points out, did not use the term "defensive imperialism" in their own writings. He suggests that Western imperialism made scholars of the early twentieth century more inclined to put a positive spin on Roman motives for conquest. He describes the blind spots in the arguments of those who employ the latter two approaches, but does not attempt to impose his own viewpoint on the reader.

The fourth chapter outlines how Roman rule transformed the provinces culturally and socially and how Rome's rule was viewed by the inhabitants of the empire. Because our best sources for this topic come from the era after the accession of Augustus, it is here that Erskine devotes most of his attention to the imperial period. Erskine discusses how Greeks, Jews, and Gauls adapted to Roman rule and how far they were able to accommodate themselves to Roman overlords. He describes how Roman culture spread throughout the empire, explains why provincial cities were eager to build temples to Roman emperors and to Rome itself, and outlines the major revolts against Roman authority.

The fifth chapter explores how acquiring an empire transformed Rome and the Romans. Erskine discusses the problem of managing an empire of about fifty million with only about 160 high-ranking officials and points out

that much administrative business was left to local elites. He argues that imperialism changed Rome into a city of marble, transformed the rest of Italy, and helped bring about the end of the Republic.

All this is a lot to accomplish in eighty-seven pages, so Erskine has to be cursory and could not cover everything. One obvious omission is any significant discussion of the Roman military. For Erskine, the question of how Rome acquired its empire is primarily a political one that has social and cultural implications.

The second half of the work contains a readable collection of primary sources in translation. The collection, organized alphabetically by name of author, is designed to be used as a reference for the first half of the work, which contains citations to the primary sources in relevant places. Some of the weaknesses of the first part are mitigated by the selection of primary material. For instance, those wanting to learn about religion's role in Roman warfare will find Livy's description of how priestly officials known as fetials declared war in ritual fashion. Those wanting some description of the Roman army will find Polybios's famous depiction of the *fustuarium*, in

which soldiers who failed to do their duty were beaten to death by men from their own unit. Likewise, several descriptions of triumphs are also given. Erskine incorporates different types of sources, not just literary but also epigraphical and numismatic, and he provides several photos of relevant works of art and architecture. Scholars interested in the Roman army at war will, however, be disappointed to discover that Erskine does not include Polybios's description of the organization of the Roman legion from book six of his *Histories*, except for the passage on discipline mentioned above.

Erskine also provides a helpful ten-page section on further reading, a list of Internet resources, a glossary of terms, and a thorough bibliography, all of which will be very useful for teachers or for those beginning research on the subject. Erskine's is a welcome but brief introduction to the causes and consequences of Roman imperialism. The chief flaw of the work is its brevity. Because this subject has been of great interest to scholars, the list of primary sources and the bibliography of modern works are enormous, perhaps too large to be easily summarized in so few pages.

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**Citation:** Jack Wells. Review of Erskine, Andrew, *Roman Imperialism*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2012.

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