

Egypt, and from the Septuagint, the translation into Greek of the Hebrew Bible, exposure to the ancient Mosaic texts.

UNRAVELING OF ALEXANDER'S VISION

This great cosmopolitan experiment began to unravel barely a century after Alexander's death. Increasingly, Greek rulers and settlers, who accounted for no more than 10 percent of the total population in the new Hellenistic kingdoms, refused to share power and prestige with the races among whom they had settled.

By the second century, many Egyptians and Persians chafed against their growing marginalization, sometimes taking the form of insurrection against Greek rule.³² In Judea, local religious partisans revolted against attempts by the Seleucid Greeks to impose pagan worship on the small but stubbornly independent-minded populace. In 168 B.C., the Jews successfully broke away from Greek rule, reestablishing their own independent state.³³

Even in Alexandria, conflicts among Greeks, Jews, and native Egyptians worsened. Corruption and palace intrigue increasingly undercut economic progress and weakened the authority of the rulers. Less than two centuries after Alexander's conquest, his Mesopotamian possessions fell to the Parthians. The Greek Indian colonies dropped even more quickly outside the orbit of the Hellenistic world.³⁴

CHAPTER FIVE

ROME—THE FIRST MEGACITY

Titus Petronius, the son of wealthy Romans and courtier to Emperor Nero, spent his time carousing through the back alleys of the city's streets, dallying with the prostitutes and loose aristocratic ladies with equal enthusiasm. Later forced to commit suicide because of his alleged complicity in a palace intrigue, Petronius left behind remarkable descriptions and insights into this city and the empire that it had created.¹

By his time, Rome had grown to a scale not to be seen again till modern times—a massive, sprawling capital city, a warren of marketplaces, drinking places, temples, crowded tenements, and aristocratic villas. In Petronius's Rome, we transcend the bounds of antiquity and move closer to contemporary New York City, Tokyo, London, Los Angeles, Shanghai, or Mexico City. With a population of more than 1 million, Rome was two to three times larger than early giant cities such as Babylon.² Like later urban leviathans, noted Lewis Mumford, Rome suffered from what he called "megalopolitan elephantiasis," a total loss of human scale.³

Yet to their everlasting credit, the Romans created the legal, economic, and engineering structures that allowed this leviathan to function as the nerve center of the world for roughly half a millennium. At its height, this greatest of city-empires ruled an expanse stretching from Britain to Mesopotamia and contained as many as 50 million people.⁴

“THE VICTORIOUS ROMANS”

How had the Romans managed this bold step into the urban future? In many ways, they did so by fusing the two great building blocks of ancient cities, religious conviction and organized military power. The Romans were unshakable in their presumption of greatness and relentless in their pursuit of empire. As Petronius noted:

The entire world was in the hands of the victorious Romans. They possessed the earth and the seas and the double field of stars, and were not satisfied.⁵

Rome's great power did not lie with its geography or natural endowment. The Tiber, which flows through the city, does not rank as a great river alongside the Tigris, the Euphrates, or the Nile. True, the city's heart enjoyed the protection of its seven hills, and its inland location provided a shield from sea invasion. But certainly these presented only a modest barrier to a determined and accomplished conqueror.

Rome enjoyed some basic economic assets, but nothing more than many other towns. The mild climate and decent soil supported a small community of shepherds and farmers. The city lay close to a point where the Tiber is most easily crossed, making early Rome a natural trade route for the surrounding peoples, notably the Etruscans, possessors at the time of a more advanced culture. Deposits of salt provided a significant item for the Romans to trade.⁶

The source of Roman greatness lay instead in their peculiar civic mythology and sense of divine mission. The city was said to be founded in the year 753 B.C. by two brothers, Romulus and Remus, abandoned by the Tiber and raised by a she-wolf. They were bloody-minded from the start, turning murderously on each other. Mars, the god of war and agriculture, developed early a strong following among these rough villagers.⁷

Initially, toughness alone was not sufficient to resist the Etruscans, who seized control of the little settlement in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. and established a kingship there. In many ways, the Romans benefited from this defeat, which exposed them to a more sophisticated culture and linked both the Greek and the Phoenician worlds.⁸

Once freed of foreign domination, the Romans quickly reformed their fledgling city-state, which in the fifth century B.C. accommodated barely

forty thousand people. By 450 B.C., they codified their government with the Law of the Twelve Tables. The codes covered everything from market days, the relationship between patrons and clients, the rights of aristocrats, and protections for plebeians.

Roman law was designed to shape the behavior of the citizen, preferably through self-regulation, into conformity with deeply held notions of personal and civic virtue. Even the Latin word *religio* itself, suggested the historian F. E. Adcock, was meant to convey the citizen's obligation to family, civic duty, and the gods.⁹

The Romans were deeply attached to their place and exhibited a powerful sense of continuity with their past. The household was at the center of everything; each family maintained an altar to honor both their ancestors and the gods.¹⁰ Rome's historic core, noted Livy, was “impregnated by religion. . . . The Gods inhabit it.”¹¹

Identification with tradition remained keen throughout most of their long history. Laws might be amended, but connection to the past lent them inestimable credibility. Something great, in their eyes, also meant something ancient.¹² “Here is my religion, here is my race, here are the traces of the forefathers,” wrote the Roman statesman Cicero in the century before Petronius. “I cannot express the charm I feel here, and which penetrates my mind and my senses.”¹³

The Romans' commitment to their *res publica*, or “public thing,” survived even after repeated disasters. Roman armies could be defeated—the city was even briefly occupied by Gallic invaders in 390 B.C.—and the city could suffer numerous fires but was always rebuilt around its ancient site. These attachments helped the Romans nurture their independent identity at a time when Greek culture dominated many other Italian cities.¹⁴

What Cicero felt in his “mind” and “senses”—this peculiar identification with the idea and place of Rome—also drove the city's relentless expansion. Over the third and second centuries B.C., the Romans fought and eventually overcame the Etruscans and the Greeks. Arguably the most critical triumph took place in 146 B.C., with the destruction of Carthage, the city-state that presented the most potent threat to Roman hegemony in the Mediterranean world.

