

HUI216

Italian Civilization

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**ROMAN EMPIRE
UNDER THE REIGN OF
AUGUSTUS CAESAR
25 B.C.**



11.1 Summary of the excerpts from *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, by Edward N. Luttwak, 1976

- Goals of Roman society/government
 - Security
 - Stability
 - Prosperity
- Their weapon technology and their military tactics were not always superior
- The system of imperial security was based on
 - Politics and diplomacy
 - A military network (roads, supply lines and deposits, barracks, defense lines, warning posts)
 - An army of professionals (not heroes or Star Trek-like "extras")
- Resilience was the quality insured by this system

11.1 Masada: security based on deterrence

- 70-73 CE: a few hundred Jews occupy a hill in the Israeli desert (of no particular strategic value)
- Options available to the Romans
 - 1) guard the place with a small garrison and wait for the eventual surrender of the occupants
 - 2) storm the mountain through its steep paths, suffering considerable casualties
- Instead, one Roman legion (out of a total of only 29) is deployed there for 3 years
- Roman troops build a ramp to have better access to the hill
- Jewish historian Josephus is brought back to Rome to detail the events, in Greek (the language of the East)

11.2 From Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire: From the First Century A.D. to the Third*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins UP, 1979. 1-5.

- In our own disordered times, it is natural to look back for comfort and instruction to the experience of Roman imperial statecraft
- No analogies are possible in the economic, social, or political spheres of life, but in the realm of strategy there are instructive similarities

11.2 From Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*: the fundamentals

- The fundamentals of Roman strategy in the imperial age were rooted not in a technology now obsolete, but in a predicament that we share
 - For the Romans, as for ourselves, the two essential requirements of an evolving civilization were a sound material base and adequate security
 - For the Romans, as for ourselves, the elusive goal of strategic statecraft was to provide security for the civilization without prejudicing the vitality of its economic base and without compromising the stability of an evolving political order
- The historic success of the Roman Empire, manifest in its unique endurance, reflected the high degree to which these conflicting imperatives were reconciled

11.2 From Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*: superiority of the Romans?

- Had the strength of the Roman Empire derived from a tactical superiority on the battlefield, from superior generalship, or from a more advanced weapons technology, there would be little to explain, though much to describe. But this was not so.
 - Roman tactics were almost invariably sound but not distinctly superior, and the Roman soldier of the imperial period was not noted for his élan
 - He was not a warrior intent on proving his manhood but a long-service professional pursuing a career; his goal and reward was not a hero's death but a severance grant upon retirement

11.2 From Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*: weaponry and leadership

- Roman weapons, far from being universally more advanced, were frequently inferior to those used by the enemies whom the empire defeated with such great regularity
- Nor could the secular survival of the empire have been ensured by a fortunate succession of great feats of generalship: the Roman army had a multitude of competent soldiers and some great generals, but its strength derived from method, not from fortuitous talent

11.2 From Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*: political goals and the military

- The firm subordination of tactical priorities, martial ideals, and warlike instincts to political goals was the essential condition of the strategic success of the empire
 - With rare exceptions, the misuse of force in pursuit of purely tactical goals, or for the psychic rewards of purposeless victories, was avoided by those who controlled the destinies of Rome
 - In the imperial period at least, military force was clearly recognized for what it is, an essentially limited instrument of power, costly and brittle
- Together with money and a manipulative diplomacy, forces visibly ready to fight but held back from battle could serve to contrive disunity among those who might jointly threaten the empire, to deter those who would otherwise attack, and to control lands and peoples by intimidation

11.2 From Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*: political use of military power

- Having learned in the earlier republican period how to defeat neighbors in battle by sheer tactical strength,
- having later mastered the strategic complexities of large-scale warfare in fighting the Carthaginians,
- the Romans finally learned that the most desirable use of military power was not military at all, but political;
 - and indeed they conquered the entire Hellenistic world with few battles and much coercive diplomacy

11.2 From Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*: conserve force, advance slowly

- The same effort to conserve force was also evident in war, at the tactical level
 - The ideal Roman general was not a figure in the heroic style, leading his troops in reckless charge to victory or death
 - He would rather advance in a slow and carefully prepared march, building supply roads behind him and fortified camps each night in order to avoid the unpredictable risks of rapid maneuver

11.2 From Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*: avoid losses whenever possible

- He preferred to let the enemy retreat into fortified positions rather than accept the inevitable losses of open warfare, and would wait to starve out the enemy in a prolonged siege rather than suffer great casualties in taking the fortifications by storm
- Overcoming the spirit of a culture still infused with Greek martial ideals (that most reckless of men, Alexander the Great, was actually an object of worship in many Roman households), the great generals of Rome were noted for their extreme caution

11.2 From Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*: a complex security system, hard to bring down

- It is precisely this aspect . . . that explains the relentless quality of Roman armies on the move, as well as their peculiar resilience in adversity:
 - the Romans won their victories slowly, but they were very hard to defeat
- Innocent of the new science of "systems analysis," the Romans designed and built large and complex security systems that successfully integrated
 - troop deployments
 - fixed defenses
 - road networks
 - signaling links

11.2 From Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*: deterrence

- In the more abstract spheres of strategy it is evident that . . . the Romans understood all the subtleties of deterrence, and also its limitations
- Above all, the Romans clearly realized that the dominant dimension of power was not physical but psychological

11.3 From Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*: the siege of Masada, 70-73 CE

- Faced with the resistance of a few hundred Jews on a mountain in the Judean desert, a place of no strategic or economic importance, the Romans could have insulated the rebels by posting a few hundred men to guard them
- Alternatively, the Romans could have stormed the mountain fortress
- The slopes of Masada are steep, and the Jews were formidable fighters, but with several thousand men pressing from all sides the defenders could not have held back the attackers for long, though they could have killed many

11.3 From Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*: the reaction of the Romans

- The Romans did none of these things
 - At a time when the entire Roman army had a total of only 29 legions to garrison the entire empire, one legion was deployed to besiege Masada, there to reduce the fortress by great works of engineering, including a huge ramp reaching the full height of the mountain
 - The entire three-year operation, and the very insignificance of its objective, must have made an ominous impression on all those in the East who might otherwise have been tempted to contemplate revolt
 - And as if to ensure that the message was duly heard, and duly remembered, Josephus was installed in Rome where he wrote a detailed account of the siege, which was published in Greek, the acquired language of Josephus, and that of the Roman East

11.4 From Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*: systems of imperial security

- Three distinct systems of imperial security can be identified
 - We may properly speak of systems, for they each integrated diplomacy, military forces, road networks, and fortifications to serve a single objective
- Each system was intended to satisfy a distinct set of priorities, themselves the reflection of changing conceptions of empire
 - hegemonic expansionism for the first system
 - territorial security for the second
 - and finally, in diminished circumstances, sheer survival for the imperial power itself

11.4 From Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*: goals and results of the 3 systems

- With the first system the Romans of the republic conquered much to serve the interests of the few, those living in the city
- Under the aegis of the second system, men born in lands far from Rome could call themselves Romans
 - The frontiers were efficiently defended to defend the growing prosperity of all, and not merely the privileged
- Under the third system, organized in the wake of the great crisis of the 3rd century, the provision of security became an increasingly heavy charge on society
 - The machinery of empire now became increasingly self-serving, with its tax-collectors, administrators, and soldiers of much greater use to one another than to society at large

11.5 About the Roman infantry

- The life of the Roman soldier was indeed full of hardship and exposed to all the risks of military life.
- The tireless, hard-working infantrymen were the backbone of the Roman army
- According to Roman sources, during the First Punic War (3rd century BCE), one unit was ordered to march an average of 16 miles a day for four entire weeks, and probably each soldier was carrying on his shoulders 50-60 pounds, between food and other supplies
- Discipline and obedience were the pillars of the culture of the Roman army, and punishments were so harsh that Roman soldiers sometimes were more scared of their own officers, of what might happen if they disobeyed orders, than of the enemy

11.5 Discipline and propaganda in the Roman army

- Regarding discipline, the image of disciplined Roman troops, waiting for orders bravely and patiently while facing an agitated horde of screaming barbarians accompanied by women and children, was dear to Roman historians; it soon became a commonplace and a regular feature of Roman propaganda
- If you want to know more, you can find images of the weapons and 'uniforms' of the Roman soldiers, plus the machines that they used in battle or during a siege here, at
 - http://www.vroma.org/~bmcmanus/romanarmy_images.html
(loads somewhat slowly because of the number of images)

11.5 The organization of the Roman army

- If you are interested, you can read in Josephus, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/josephus-warb.html> how organized the Roman army was
- Of course, Josephus was not the most impartial of historians; in fact here is his 'official disclaimer':
 - This account I have given the reader, not so much with the intention of commending the Romans, as of comforting those that have been conquered by them, and for the deterring others from attempting innovations under their government.
- Here is a passage from *The Jewish War*
 - When they have thus secured themselves, they live together by companies, with quietness and decency, as are all their other affairs managed with good order and security. Each company hath also their wood, and their corn, and their water brought them, when they stand in need of them; for they neither sup nor dine as they please themselves singly, but all together.

11.5 Josephus describes the Roman army: the chain of command, the ranks

- Their times also for sleeping, and watching, and rising are notified beforehand by the sound of trumpets, nor is any thing done without such a signal; and in the morning the soldiery go every one to their centurions, and these centurions to their tribunes, to salute them; with whom all the superior officers go to the general of the whole army, who then gives them of course the watchword and other orders, to be by them cared to all that are under their command; which is also observed when they go to fight, and thereby they turn themselves about on the sudden, when there is occasion for making sallies, as they come back when they are recalled in crowds also. When, after this, they are gone out of their camp, they all march without noise, and in a decent manner, and every one keeps his own rank, as if they were going to war.

11.6 Optional readings on the life of Roman soldiers

- You may want to read these two short letters written by Roman soldiers to their families:
 - <http://www.csun.edu/~hcfll004/paplet1.htm>
 - they are simple examples of documents illustrating everyday life in ancient Roman society
- The Romans were very superstitious, so religious buildings and statues were sometimes left intact during military campaigns
- But many small items would be stolen from the temples anyway
 - Here you can look at a menorah being paraded in Rome after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem; the picture is taken from a relief that can be seen on the arch of Titus in Rome
 - http://wings.buffalo.edu/AandL/Maecenas/rome/arch_titus/ac822727.html

11.7 Tacitus and the idea of a decadent Roman empire: summary of topics

- Roman historian Tacitus and the fabrication of the idea of the decadent empire
 - Latin historiography: the genre, the writers
- Excerpts from Tacitus, on the mutiny of the legions and on the murder of Agrippina
- Nero's Golden House
- Claudio Monteverdi's opera on Nero, *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (1642)
- Petrolini's *Nero* (1930)

11.8 Publius Cornelius Tacitus: his life and career

- 55 or 56 CE: Tacitus is born (a Roman citizen of Northern Italian or Gallic origin)
- 88: he is praetor under the Emperor Domitian
- 90-93: he is not in Rome; probably serving in some imperial province
- 93: his father-in-law, the powerful general Agricola, dies
- 97: Tacitus serves as consul under the Emperor Nerva
 - the consulship was not abolished under the Empire, even though the powers of the consuls were greatly reduced

11.8 Tacitus: the *Germania*

- 98: he writes a biography of Agricola, followed by the *Germania*, one of the first written documents on the ancient Germans
- Even though they were considered barbarians, Tacitus manages to see in the Germans traces of those qualities that he thought had made the first Romans great and powerful
 - a deep sense of honor
 - respect for bravery and for heroism
 - appreciation of, and respect for a simple and frugal life

11.8 Tacitus

- 109: writes the *Historiae* (a historical work covering the years from 68 to 96 CE)
- c.112: Tacitus is proconsul of the province of Asia (one of the wealthiest regions of the Empire, in Turkey)
- c.114: writes the *Annals* (about the history of the Empire between 14 and 68 CE)
- 118 or 119: Tacitus dies

11.9 The rediscovery of Tacitus by humanists

- The texts written by Tacitus were copied and preserved during the Middle Ages, but the few existing copies did not circulate much and were not widely read or very well known
- They were rediscovered during the 14th and 15th century, thanks especially to the efforts by Italian Poggio Bracciolini, the quintessential humanist
 - There amid a tremendous quantity of books which it would take too long to describe, we found Quintilian still safe and sound, though filthy with mold and dust. For these books were not in the Library, as befitted their worth, but in a sort of foul and gloomy dungeon at the bottom of one of the towers, where not even men convicted of a capital offense would have been stuck away

11.9 The rediscovery of Tacitus by Poggio Bracciolini

(from <http://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/tacitus/>)

- As for the monastery of Corvey, which is in Germany, you have no grounds for hope. There are supposed to be a lot of books there; I do not believe the tales of fools but even if what they say were true, the whole country is a den of thieves. Even those natives who stay in the Curia do not go back safely to their own country. [1420]
- You have almost all the news, but I am keeping the honey for the last. A friend of mine, who is a monk from a monastery in Germany and who left us lately, sent me a letter which I received three days ago. He writes that he has found several volumes of the kind you and I like which he wants to exchange for the Novella of Joannes Andreae or for both the Speculum and its supplements, and he sends the names of the books enclosed in the letter. . . . Among these volumes are Julius Frontinus and several works of Cornelius Tacitus still unknown to us.
- Dear Nicolaus, write to me as soon as you can what to answer him so that everything may be done according to your judgement; I care for only a few things, which you will see for yourself. Goodbye, I have written this in great haste. Rome, the third day of November [1425].

11.9 The rediscovery of Tacitus by Poggio Bracciolini

(from <http://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/tacitus/>)

- I have given up the great hope which I built on his promises; that is the reason why I did not make a particular effort to write you this, for if there had been anything unusual or worthy of our wisdom, I should not only have written to you but flown to you to tell you about it in person. This monk is in need of money; I have discussed helping him, provided only that he gives me for this money the Ammianus Marcellinus, the first Decade of Livy, and one volume of the Orations of Cicero, to mention works we both have, and quite a few others, which although we have them are not to be disdained. I asked furthermore that they be carried at his risk to Nuremberg. This I am handling. I do not know how it will turn out; however you will find it all out from me in due course. . . . Rome, the fifteenth of May [1427]

11.10 Tacitus and Tacitism during the late Renaissance

- Made popular by the numerous editions produced after the invention of the printing press, translated in Italian, French and English, Tacitus was often read not just as a historian or a literary writer, but as a pure political thinker, an expert of evil conspiracies and a connoisseur of ruthless political strategies
 - This is certainly the case for many of the episodes from the life of Emperor Nero

11.10 Tacitus and Tacitism during the late Renaissance

- After Machiavelli's *Prince* stimulated the debate on the art of politics and on the use of all means possible to obtain and maintain power, Tacitus attracted even more attention because of the large number of examples of deceitful politics that he offered while describing the lives and the deeds of the Roman Emperors
- Between the 16th and the 18th-century, Tacitus was widely read or rather misread in Europe
 - For some he was the ally of absolutism, teaching tyrants how to master their unruly subjects. For others, he was the rector of republicanism (Howard D. Weinbrot, "Politics, taste, and national identity: some uses of Tacitism in 18th-century Britain" 168)

11.11 Classical historiography

- When you read the excerpts from Tacitus, about the mutiny of the Roman Legions and about the lives and crimes of the members of one of the most famous Roman Imperial families, you should not take everything at face value
- On one hand, historiography at the time of Tacitus was mostly a literary genre, preoccupied with the task of entertaining the reader as much as it was with the duty of providing accurate accounts of historical events
 - Historiography than was not a scientific discipline in the way it is conceived and organized today
 - Classical historians were different from their modern counterparts because they usually ignored many social and economic phenomena or trends that involved the whole of society, to focus almost exclusively on single individuals (heroes or villains) and on the direct consequences of their actions
 - As a result classical historiography emphasizes a moralistic view of history and of the actions and behaviors of its protagonists

11.11 Decadence in the history books of the Romans

- Never forget that what you have read is practically literature, from a time in which classical culture showed a particular inclination for an almost Baroque representation of violence, sex, intrigue, simulation and dissimulation
- The myth or legend of an extraordinarily corrupt Roman Empire, the cradle of all kinds of impious and immoral behaviors, especially in reference to the first century of the common era, is an exaggeration, conjured up by an elite of conservative, nostalgic historians who had a virtual monopoly on the field of historiography

11.11 Roman historiography and the Senate

- When it comes to the Roman sources regarding the time of the first Emperors, unless you take into consideration the remaining documents pertaining to the administration of the Empire, including the laws passed during that period, you may be easily swayed by the uniformity (at least in spirit) of the accounts of Tacitus and others
- This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that from the first centuries of the republic (and even earlier if you consider the activity of the priests who were in charge of writing the official Annals of the Roman state), Rome's government was always very sensitive to the task of recording historical events for future memory, and it was usually the Senate's conservative elite that produced the official or the most famous historians

11.11 Roman historiography and the Emperors

- When the republic came to an end and the Empire was established, things changed very slowly, not to upset the delicate stability restored in Roman society, and for some time that same conservative elite continued to be represented (almost exclusively) in the field of professional historiography
- Even the great Julius Caesar had been aware of the political inclinations of many Roman historians, and one of the reasons why he wrote his commentaries on Civil War was to provide the public with his own version of the events, in which he stressed whenever possible the clemency that he showed towards his defeated enemies, in an attempt to bring back peace and to reconcile the different factions under his leadership
- Later on the negative representation and the rumors spread by conservative historians of Tacitus's age were appropriated by the official propaganda of enlightened Emperors such as Trajan, who made a point of showing his subjects that he was not like Caligula or Nero, thus reinforcing the one-sided presentation of those leaders

11.11 Roman historiography and the first Emperors

- Not that Nero did not do some or many of the things he was accused of by Tacitus: the point is exactly that Tacitus only reports on the crimes and on the constant display of odd behaviors, unbecoming of an Emperor
- You get the impression that those Emperors (Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, etc.) were so involved in their own private lives and in their own mischievous practices that the administration of the Empire suffered, which is not necessarily true
- It is true, though, that especially starting with the third century many Emperors were chosen by the praetorian guards (the elite military unit that was in charge of the defense of the Imperial palace and in charge of maintaining the order in the city of Rome), and more than a few were glaringly inadequate for that position, having been chosen because of their popularity with the soldiers, or because they had promised large donations or considerable pay raises