How Did The Rise Of Rome And Its Empire Assist In The Development Of Western Europe.? Essay, Research Paper

Early historical Italy contained a diversity of peoples, with different languages, cultures and levels of civilisation; the city of Rome being just one of many scores of Italian communities scattered over Italy. However, in a very short time Rome began to rise above its neighbouring counterparts, quickly establishing itself as a city of great power within Italy. The gradual expansion of its interests abroad led to the formation of one of the greatest Empires the world has ever seen. It was this dominance, especially of the western hemisphere, that allowed the process of `Romanisation’ to proceed. The traditional date for the foundation of Rome is 753BC. At this time the development of the city began with the unification of several hilltop settlements into one large urbanised area, later extending into the bend in the river Tiber. From its outset, Rome had the supreme advantage of a central position in the Italian peninsula (Appendix, figure 1) and with the distinctive topography of its site (see Appendix, figure 2), it soon developed into an emerging european power. This map (figure 2) shows Rome at a later stage in its development but indicates adequately how the seven hills it is built upon provided an easily defendable site. It also displays how essential the Tiber was to the development of Rome; acting as a bridging point and allowing the city to operate as a port and a place of contact between the Mediterranean maritime world and the peoples of the Italian peninsula. As Rome accumulated wealth and power from this maritime trade its attention turned to more ambitious matters; that of conquering the various races that constituted Italy. After repeated failures Rome overcame the Etruscans and Gauls in the north; the Sabines, Volscians, and Hernicans in the near east and south; and the Greeks in the south. The extent of Roman expansion in Italy by 268BC was remarkable, other than a few Samnite settlements in the south, the Romans had total control of the nucleus of the Italian peninsula (Appendix, figure 3). During this period of expansion throughout Italy, one of the most important victories, and the one that had the most far-reaching consequences for the future development of Roman Italy, was against the Samnites. The first stage of the war resulted in the foundation of the fortresses Luceria, Apulia and Campania and also the construction of the great south road, the Via Appia, and the great north road, the Via Flaminia. As the conflict continued the Samnites drew support from various other races, their resistance making necessary the consolidation of Romes’ position by the building of further roads and colonies. By the time the Samnites were finally defeated the Romans had laid the foundations of an infrastructure that was to play a key role in the future development and defense of Italy, and was to be used as a blueprint for the subsequent conquest of foreign territories. The development of the road network throughout Italy (as a result of the war against the Samnites) acted as a powerful instrument of social change, a property that the Roman government recognised and utilised to its fullest extent (Ward-Perkins, 1972). Whilst building the roads Rome realised that they would cause a significant shift in the emphasis of the population, away from many of the old towns and rural areas to the new settlements that developed along its length. Any existing towns that the new road system avoided would be unlikely to prosper economically since they would not be situated on the emerging trade routes. This realisation was used by the Romans to reduce the power of some of their more hostile neighbours, especially the Etruscan city of Veii which for several decades threatened the very existence of Rome, and thus further enhanced its position as Italy’s leading city. Once the Romans had established this superiority, the central political body in Rome sought to maintain it; their first principle being Divide et impera (Divide to conquer). This meant that Rome tolerated no league or alliances between tribes or cities, treating each one as an independent unit and giving them all separate treaty’s. This was instigated to minimise the risk of a combination of races cooperating with one another to overthrow Romes dominant position. Romes emphasis on political measures as a means of control resulted in further policies being implemented to ensure the loyalty of the newly conquered races. This involved categorising tribes/cities into “full Roman citizenship”, “partial Roman citizenship” or simply “allied community” groups (Appendix, figure 3). Each category was given different rights within the Roman constitution; “full Roman citizenship” meant that the population were allowed to vote at the Citizens Assembly and therefore had some power over future law changes and policy adaptations; “allied communities” had none of these privileges and were simply required to send their own contingents to fight alongside the Roman legionaries if necessary. This hierarchy of privilege groups meant that tribes/cities in the upper echelons were permanently trying to thank the government of Rome for the honour they had been bestowed with, and thus remained loyal and trustworthy as a means of repayment. The majority of these privileged groups were concentrated in a close proximity to Rome and thus, via the implementation of a number of clever political measures, the city was provided with sufficent protection to make any idea of a siege a foolhardy venture for the allied communities. However, as an additional safeguard against this threat the central government of Rome also established colonies in strategic positions amongst the allied communities (Appendix, figure 4). These either acted as an alarm bell, warning Rome of any impending attacks, or as an outside force that crushed any uprising before it could gather momentum. In return for their help, the government officially allocated allotments of newly conquered land to the colonists. So, by using a clever combination of “brains and brawn” and exhibiting a genius for political control, administration and organisation never before experienced in western europe, the Romans unified Italy. Their efficient army and structured government established a standard and set of laws that all Roman and Romanised citizens tried to uphold, in the process creating a moral and political fabric that strengthened the bonds between different races and cultures and secured a solidarity that was to be the foundation for future successes. After unifying Italy, the government of Rome was again able to turn its attention to more pressing matters; namely, securing the vast coastline of the Italian peninsula from the increasing threats of Carthage, a wealthy maritime power. The only way Rome could possibly achieve this was to become a naval power that could realistically challenge, and beat, Carthage in a battle for control of the Mediterranean waters. It was the Romans attempted accomplishment of this feat that caused the three Punic wars that were to stretch the Romans resilience and economy to the full. The first Punic War occurred in Sicily between 264BC and 241BC. The Romans agreed to help Messana expel the Carthaginians from the island and this required the improvement of their naval fleet, a development that was to dramatically change the fortunes of the rest of western Europe. After twenty-three years of fighting the Romans finally forced the Carthaginians to evacuate Sicily, but only after drawing heavily upon their own and their allies manpower. Their success was due, mainly, to two key Roman characteristics; firstly, their tenacity, building fleet after fleet to repair their losses; and secondly, their desire and total commitment to dominate the Mediterranean maritime world. The second Punic War occurred in 218BC when Hannibal marched swiftly upon Italy from Spain, hoping that a rapid series of successes would win over Romes allies. Much of southern Italy joined Hannibal but they were nonetheless unable to undermine Romes’ heartland in central Italy. By 203BC Hannibal had left. Once again, it was a combination of two factors that prevented Rome from falling; firstly, the unerring patience and persistence of the Roman character in defending their territory; and secondly, the loyalty of Romes allies. The expulsion of Hannibal from Italy was a perfect example of how advanced and far-seeing the liberal policies of the Roman government were; almost all of Romes allies provided men and money for the war as a result of the treaty’s they had organised with them. However, the real backbone behind this, and all other Roman victories, was the Centurion. Their mastery of drill and discipline held companies together, whilst their spirit and loyalty inspired many victories; “I have served 22 campaigns and am over 50. But in no circumstances am I going to beg off service if I am thought fit, and am prepared to accept any rank to which I am assigned by the Tribunes. I shall always take pains to surpass all others in valour and I advise all you my comrades, like me, to put yourselves at the disposal of the Senate and to consider any post as honourable, where you can defend the Roman Commonwealth”. (Spurius Ligustinus, Centurion, 171 – from protest made by some centurions in 171 at being posted to commands lower than those held before – leaflet entitled “Centurions”, Wroxeter Viroconium) By the time the Romans had crushed Carthage in the third, and final, Punic War they had already established themselves as the dominant maritime power in the Mediterranean; extending their Empire to include Sicily, Corsica, Sardinia and Africa. With the destruction of Corinth, the commercial capital of Greece, and Carthage, their other great trade rival, Rome was free to expand relatively uninhibited into Europe. The process of Romanising western (and eastern) Europe was a very deliberate one; the central government of Rome, being careful not to stretch their resources too far, planned their expansion meticulously. Although the Romans encountered some resistance, the tribes they fought were no match for their military; highly organised and well trained after their years of fighting. By AD60 the Roman Empire had extended to include the whole of the Mediterranean world and parts of Britain (Appendix, figure 5). This spread of Roman interests deep into western Europe brought the same benefits experienced by newly unified Roman Italy. As Gutkind (1969) notes; “Roman expansion into the west can be seen as the coming of a great civilised power, bringing a higher culture and law to semi-barbaric tribes”. The most essential characteristic of this “Roman civilisation”, and one of the greatest gifts given by Rome to western Europe, was the city. The Romans saw the city as the pinnacle of civilisation and a good way of pacifying a recently conquered barbarian area, since it brought with their arrival a better standard of living. As the Roman Empire extended further into territory many miles away from the heartland of Rome, the central government ordered the formation of coloniae; strategically placed colonies that acted as a “watch tower and bulwark of the Roman people and a barrier of defence over and against the barbarians” (Alexander, 1972). These new towns were founded with very definite and precise objectives; to ensure the alliance of their newly conquered lands; and to act as administrative centres or as quasi-military strong-points. The important role these towns had to play in the pacification and Romanisation of the west resulted in a combination of civil and military strategies that determined their most effective structure and shape. The result was an adaptation of the military gridiron plan, since this regular lay-out was the best and simplest under conditions demanding a combination of safety, strength and convenience. This type of walled city was so successful that it remained to become a widespread feature of the landscape of medieval Europe. Initially these towns were solely the barracks of the Roman army and Roman colonists sent by the central government but, as communications between the Romans and the barbarians improved, they were very quickly settled by traders who established markets outside the town walls. These small market towns often became permanent settlements in their own right (Vici). As the numbers of these coloniae grew, with Roman expansion continuing into the west, the previously barbarian landscape was slowly forced to begin a process of civilisation. This process was facilitated by the Romans, who proceeded to transfer knowledge and skills from Rome to their newly conquered lands. Within the coloniae the most important development was the establishment of a political and judicial system, similar to that of Rome. This was maintained by a Magistrate who gradually taught the barbarians the value of political compromise and who updated the laws as the coloniae extended. Even after the collapse of the Roman Empire and their retreat from western Europe, the foundations of the Roman judicial system remained; being carefully nurtured and developed as society evolved. An important role in the widespread development of coloniae and independent market towns was played by the Roman road network (Appendix, figure 6). Initially constructed to transport Legions quickly to the source of a battle, their value as important trade links and carriers of potential consumers was quickly realised. By AD200 the trading network from ports within the Roman Empire was huge (Appendix, figure 7); the main commodities being pottery, metals, wool and wine. This network also had another function; it began to tie Europe together, integrating different races needs and forming interdependencies with previously alien people. The realisation that the roads were a good source/outlet for trade acted as a catalyst that spawned the growth of many small market communities, gradually causing a new spatial concentration of western Europes’ population around the roads (see figure 6 and note the presence of Roman roads leading into London, Chester and Bath). This shift away from the previously rural, spatially diffused habitat of western races, marked a significant change in western European culture and the beginnings of a truly urbanised Europe. The Roman limes along the boundary of their Empire also served as a further focal point of trading activity and another source of small market towns (Vici). The sheer number of these limes resulted in great economic and urban growth along the boundaries; with the soldiers who required regular supplies of food and goods for their forts, attracting the attention of the local traders who often pitched camp at the foot of the walls (Gutkind, 1969). One of the best example of limes spawning the birth and expansion of a multitude of semi-urban areas, was at the Rhine-Danube border, which had one of the largest concentrations of protective limes in the Empire (Appendix, figure 8). The relative urban status of this area is reflected in the considerable amount and variety of trading that took place between the Roman legions and local citizens; the fundamental goods being metals, glass, wine and pottery (Appendix, figure 7). The introduction of goods from the newly acquired parts of eastern Europe provided an added enthusiasm for trade that further facilitated the development of western Europe. However, although the presence of the Romans in the west began the process of civilisation (or Romanisation), their expansion into the east brought these conquered races no such reward. Whereas Gutkind (1969) noted the arrival of the Romans in the west “as the coming of the great civilised power”, in the east they encountered a race significantly more civilised than themselves and with cultural achievements far superior to their own. In Greek eyes the coming of the Romans was seen as the coming of the barbarians. However, the west has to be grateful for the Romans arrival in Greece; for although they may have been more interested in acquiring knowledge and sharing it (since this ensures a stable Empire), than in exploring new fields of learning, what use is knowledge if nobody knows it? The Romans therefore, acted as the medium through which Greek knowledge and skills were spread throughout the western world. Greek geometry was used by the Romans for the lay-out of land, the supply of water and the building of towns; Greek medicine was put to a practical use by building hospitals and organising medical services for the army; Greek scientific knowledge was used to improve existing irrigation systems; and Greek art, philosophy and literature was introduced to the newly civilised western world. It is therefore evident that in conquering the east, the Romans had considerably advanced their own standard of living as well as the rest of its Empire. To conclude, the dramatic ascension of Rome up the urban hierarchy and the subsequent growth of its empire had important consequences, not only for Italy, but also Western Europe. Its success owed much to the characteristics of its race and the faith they had in the gifted politicians that governed and administered Romes’ expanding territories. In conquering and unifying new lands the Romans brought civilisation to the barbarian west via a network of roads and the establishment of an interdependent urban community that revolved around trade. Its expansion into the east and its subsequent role as medium, introduced the fields of science and philosophy that were to profoundly advance the Romans own level of civilisation and dramatically improve the future of western Europe.