

Was Rome Worth the Trouble?

The Urth list — 4 messages, 3 voices, 18 Jun 2003

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James Wynn — 18 Jun 2003, 20:48

Crush wrote:

Rome was not even considered worth the trouble for Alexander the Great or his heirs to conquer.

Mantis responded:

Not to give you a hard time, and granted there is always argument between historians, but I just read a book, THE FATES OF NATIONS: A BIOLOGICAL THEORY OF HISTORY (1980), where the author Paul Colinvaux wrote that Alexander avoided Rome as too tough (and possibly "too poor"?) for a proper victim of a war of aggression. According to Colinvaux, the war of aggression requires that the aggressor have a technological edge over the victim, and the victim must have a resource that the aggressor wants. The Macedonian phalanx famously carved up the Persians, showing the edge; the Persian empire had land and wealth.

Oh, I see I'm not really arguing with you after all! Since I put in the "too poor" part it falls under the rubric of "not worth the trouble" in your message. I.e., it would have been trouble, since the technological edge favoring Macedonia over Rome was slight if it existed at all, and the potential rewards were much less than those offered by the pesky Persians.

Feel free to give me a hard time. My life is far too cushy as it is. :-)

Since we've agreed to agree, I'm possibly putting too fine a hair on it to say I'd put more weight on the words "not worth" while you would emphasize "the trouble". Perhaps Colinvaux has seen evidence I'm not familiar with (in which case, I'm really sticking my neck out), but I don't currently think the Italian interior would have seemed an imposing task to the conquerors of Persia who toyed with conquering India.

1. Checking "The Chronicles of the Roman World" by Timothy R. Roberts to refamiliarize myself with the general chronology, Magna Graecia (the Greek colonies of southern Italy which were directly adjacent to Latium) seems to have felt secure enough behind their phalanxes not to formally recognize Rome until late in the 4th century. Tarentum first established a peace treaty with her "as early as" 303 B.C. (twenty years after the death of Alexander). I'm by no means certain but I *think* Magna Graecia fell under the Macedonian empire during Philip II's reign (the father of Alexander the Great). Carthage had diplomatically recognized Rome in 348 BC but only in a general agreement to stop pirating off the Italian coast. But she made a more formal treaty with Rome in 303 BC. So it seems that Rome's neighbors first viewed her as a *regional* power to be reckoned with at the very end of the 4th century, but even then the Italian Greeks considered the Romans and presumably the rest of the Italian interior to be rustic and uncivilized.

2. At the time of Alexander and until the very beginning of the 3rd century BC, the Italian interior was still divided between Romans, Etruscans, Samnites, Umbrians, and Gauls who were all anxious to exterminate one another. During this time, Rome was engaged in a war against

an alliance of some of these that it nearly lost.

3. As for technology, it wasn't until after she beat Pyrrhus (275 BC) that the Roman manipulus was seen as a genuine answer to the Greek phalanx. I don't know when the manipulus was first developed. Rome wouldn't have warships or shipwrights until the middle of the 3rd century so Latro's initial ignorance about them makes sense.

So Italy was conveniently proximate to the Macedonian Empire, strategically divided, and technologically unrated. For Livy's patriotic opinion on whether Alexander could have conquered Rome had he tried, see his Book 9:17.

What set Rome apart from all its local adversaries IMO was astounding nerve coupled with exceptional discipline, competence and strategic imagination. All this exhibited itself in steely tenaciousness -- a willingness to lose and lose and see it only as an opportunity to adapt and adapt. But none of her neighbors seemed to appreciate these virtues until they were practically under her boot -- certainly not the Italian Greeks. So who was telling Alexander that the Romans were "too tough".

As for being poor, that is surely true. It just seems obvious to me that the Italian interior avoided the avarice of the previous Empires by not having anything worth having in their eyes. No doubt the attitudes of the Magna Graecians encouraged this belief. Rome had no significant mines. The first minted Roman coins appeared in 310 BC in conquered cities (not Rome itself) cast from loot melted down to pay the soldiers. Rome had no monuments, history, scholars, or literature. The land was mountainous and wild. What did Rome have to offer but slaves? Rome's civilization was invisible to the eyes of the "civilized" world. The Etruscans were good sculptors and artisans but the Greeks were as good or better.

All this to say that the idea of a disciplined, tactically competent Roman century in 478 BC would surely be anachronistic -- of course, we don't know that Latro's Romans were competent, but Latro certainly is. Perhaps Wolfe will develop a rationalization for this in the next novel.

-- Crush

Andrew Bollen — 19 Jun 2003, 02:45 · follows James Wynn

Crush writes: [Some good stuff] ..

FWIW, I've been quickly brushing up on Roman "history" from the period, such as it is. The main themes are struggles between the plebs and patricians over agrarian reform and debt forgiveness, and conflict with the Etruscan etc neighbors.

A context for Lucius & his comrades and what they would be doing so far afield should be in here somewhere. Maybe something to do with the aftermath of Coriolanus (about 490), who Livy thinks was exiled rather than executed by the disappointed Volscians he commanded (as Plutarch says). Coriolanus = Gnaeus Marcius, so not quite the "Marcus" whose death Latro laments in Ch 24, unfortunately. (The other name he mentions, "Umeri", doesn't look Roman at all.)

Latro's vision of his home, with his aged father plowing the fields, doesn't suggest a very patrician background, but on the other hand, he has a patrician kind of name in Lucius (Lucius Brutus = founder of the republic, in 509), so perhaps we are to think of an exiled patrician family in reduced circumstances? And Latro & comrades taking up the mercenary profession because there's not much else to do? Dunno.

Anyway, the picture painted in Livy is one of constant petty wars with neighbors, and a very martial society. It sounds like Pausanias' description of Greece in Mist - every little village sending its army out against its neighbor - and I guess we're supposed to draw parallels between Sparta and Rome. Pausanias thinks Sparta is destined to gather these villages into a united state & lead it, but this was Rome's destiny. Pausanias is in the process of being corrupted by looted Persian wealth, away from his Spartan simplicity, in the same way the looted wealth of the east would corrupt Rome. And so on.

Josh Geller — 19 Jun 2003, 03:21 · follows Andrew Bollen

On Wed, 2003-06-18 at 19:45, Andrew Bollen wrote:

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A Republican patrician family wasn't necessarily wealthy. Cincinnatus, the famous dictator, owned an estate of three acres, where he worked in the field personally. Later Romans used to go on about it.

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Josh Geller — 19 Jun 2003, 03:50 · follows Josh Geller

On Wed, 2003-06-18 at 20:19, Andrew Bollen wrote:

From: "Josh Geller" <brunians at brunians.org>

A Republican patrician family wasn't necessarily wealthy. Cincinnatus, the famous dictator, owned an estate of three acres, where he worked in the field personally. Later Romans used to go on about it.

This did occur to me, but I always thought the story was probably BS.

Could be, might not be. These things happen sometimes. Who would have thought a US Grant or a Harry Truman could ever be President?

Anyway, C. was Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, appointed dictator in 458, so maybe our Latro? Probably not, given that Livy has him at 80+ years old when appointed dictator again in 439. But one of his first acts in 458 was to appoint as "Master of the Horse, Lucius Tarquinius, a member of a patrician house, but owing to his poverty he had served in the infantry, where he was considered by far the finest of the Roman soldiers." That could be our man, maybe.

It could indeed.

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