

Chapter 10: Rome: From City-State to Empire: 10-2c The Conquest of the East

Book Title: World Civilizations

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10-2c The Conquest of the East

Victorious against Carthage, the Romans at once turned their eyes eastward. Until now, they had tried to stay out of the continuous quarreling of the Hellenistic kingdoms. But in the 190s, immediately after the Punic Wars, ambitious consuls saw an opportunity to profit from the internal Greek struggle. Within a short time, the Greco-Macedonian kingdom was under Rome's control.

Roman armies soon defeated the other Hellenistic kingdoms around the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea. These petty kingdoms could have been made into Roman provinces without delay. But some senators expressed strong opposition to this move, believing that the expansive, materialistic society being created by military conquests was far from what Roman traditions of thrifty living and modest ambition honored. A seesaw struggle between conservatives, who wished Rome to remain an ethnically homogeneous Italian city-state mainly comprising owners of small tracts of land, and imperialists, who wanted expansion (and landed wealth!), went on for about a century (150–50 B.C.E.). The conservatives were fighting for a lost cause, however. By the latter date, the question had become which of the pro-imperialist groups would eventually seize supreme power.

An outstanding military machine executed the conquest of the East. It comprised mainly infantry, which was recruited from among all male citizens. In the early republic only property holders were allowed citizenship, and only citizens could bear arms. The commanders were all patricians, whereas the plebeians served in the ranks. Service was for an indefinite term, and as the wars multiplied in the fourth and third centuries B.C.E., many citizens were away from their homes for lengthy periods, sometimes years. The effects were ruinous for many simple peasant-soldiers, who could not adequately tend their fields and had no other source of income (because army service was considered an honor, soldiers were not paid).

As early as the mid-300s, military needs were urgent enough that a group of permanent commanders/governors called [proconsuls \(Provincial governors and military commanders in ancient Rome.\)](#) was created. The custom of electing commanders annually fell into disuse because it was clear that men of talent would be needed for more than a year. In this way a group of men emerged who were both politically potent through their connections in the Senate and militarily potent through their command responsibilities. So long as they continued to regard the Senate and the consuls whom the Senate elected as their rightful superiors, all went well.

But it was inevitable that an ambitious commander would come along who looked first to personal advancement and only later—or never—to the welfare of the state. Such men began to appear regularly after the First Punic War, which created myriad opportunities to

get rich in the new territories won from Carthage. These opportunities redoubled after the Second Punic War. By then Rome was rapidly developing a volunteer professional army that would look to its field commanders and not to a distant Senate as its legitimate director.

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