

ARTHUR M. ECKSTEIN

Mediterranean  
Anarchy,  
Interstate War,  
*AND THE*  
Rise of Rome

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# Political Science and Roman History

International politics in the ancient Mediterranean world was long a multipolar anarchy—a world containing a plurality of powerful states, contending with each other for hegemony, within a situation where international law was minimal and in any case unenforceable. None of these powerful states ever achieved lasting hegemony around the shores of the great sea: not Persia, not Athens, not Sparta; not Tarentum, not Syracuse, not Carthage. Alexander III the Great, the fearsome king of Macedon, might have established a permanent political entity encompassing the entire Mediterranean, but the conqueror of Asia died prematurely in Babylon in 323 B.C., at age 32, and the empire he had created almost immediately fell apart. During the chaos that followed Alexander's death, several of his generals founded great territorial states themselves, Macedonian dynasties with worldwide ambitions, each in bitter competition for power with the others: the Ptolemaic regime based in Egypt; the Seleucids based in Syria and Mesopotamia; the Antigonids based in Macedon. But despite the brilliance, vigor, and ruthlessness of the founders—and the brilliance, vigor, and ruthlessness of some of their successors—none of these monarchies was ever able to establish universal domination. The world of multipolarity and unstable balances of power continued in the Mediterranean—along with the prevalence of war and the absence of international law.

Eventually, however, one state did create predominance throughout the Mediterranean world: the Republic of Rome. By the 180s B.C., al-

though there still remained in existence several important states other than Rome, the Mediterranean finally had only one political and military focus, and only one dominant actor; there was a preponderance of power in the hands of a single state. In political-science terminology, a system of unipolarity had replaced the long-standing multipolar anarchy.<sup>1</sup> Samuel Huntington sets higher standards of dominance for the presence of a unipolar situation, defining unipolarity as a system where there is “one superpower, no significant major powers, and many minor powers,” in which the dominant power has the capability to “resolve important international issues alone,” and where no combination of other states has the power to prevent it from doing so. Even by this stricter definition the Mediterranean was beginning to approach that situation by the 180s, and had definitely achieved it by the 160s.<sup>2</sup> It should be emphasized that although Rome in this period had begun direct administration of some areas in the West (Sicily; Sardinia and Corsica; the eastern regions of Spain), it was still far from converting this new international situation into anything like a formal empire on a Mediterranean-wide basis. There was, even in the 160s, not the slightest direct and formal Roman administration in the Greek East. But in political-science terminology the Mediterranean had now become a unipolar system instead of a multipolar world; and so it would remain for the next six hundred years.<sup>3</sup>

The central questions with which modern historians of Rome contend in the period of enormous expansion in Roman power and influence from the 340s B.C. have been (1) the motivations behind Roman expansion, and (2) the reasons for Roman hegemonic success. Clearly Roman motives were complex, and the reasons for the exceptional success of the Republic were similarly multiple. The analytical situation is made much

1. Unipolarity as an international system containing only one predominant state and one dominant actor (admitted to be an imprecise definition): Mastanduno 1997: 52; cf. Geller and Singer 1998: 114; Evans and Newnham 1998: 550.

2. Huntington 1999: 35. Some scholars think Huntington’s definition sets too high a standard of dominance for the unipolar power: Brooks and Wohlforth 2002: 20–21. That Rome had achieved the vaguer definition of unipolarity by the 180s B.C., and then achieved Huntington’s definition of unipolarity by ca. 168 B.C., is—strikingly—the approximate thesis of the Hellenistic historian Polybius, writing ca. 150 B.C. See Polyb. 1.1–4 and 29.21 and 27, discussed below, chap. 7.

3. The long political evolution necessary for turning a balance of power in the Greek East greatly favoring Rome into a formal empire (an evolution not completed until the 60s B.C.): see Kallet-Marx 1995. The characteristics that can lead to great durability in a unipolar system: see Wohlforth 1999: 5–41; Wohlforth 2002: 98–118. The dominance achieved by Rome ca. 188 does not minimize the actions taken by the Romans in 188–168 B.C., and continuing sporadically thereafter, to prevent the rise of any potential rivals.

more difficult because our knowledge of events is far from complete. One theme, however, has come to dominate modern scholarship on this problem: that Rome was exceptionally successful within its world because Roman society and culture, and Rome's stance toward other states, were exceptionally warlike, exceptionally aggressive, and exceptionally violent—and not merely in modern terms but in ancient terms as well. The most influential work here is that of W. V. Harris, especially in his brilliant and groundbreaking book *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome*.<sup>4</sup> On this model, Rome was a vicious and voracious predator, in political-science terminology a “revolutionary” or “unlimited revisionist state” in the successive and ever larger state-systems in which it participated; the other Italian states and then the other Mediterranean states were its victims. On such a model, the rise to world power of exceptionally militaristic and bellicose Rome is self-explanatory.<sup>5</sup>

The present study takes a different approach. It applies to other ancient states the insights and method of analysis pioneered by Harris concerning Rome. It finds militarism, bellicosity, and diplomatic aggressiveness rife throughout the polities of the ancient Mediterranean both east and west. And it argues that while Rome was certainly a harshly militaristic, warlike, aggressive, and expansionist state from a modern perspective, so too were all Rome's competitors, in an environment that was an exceptionally cruel interstate anarchy. Moreover, the present study finds the origins of the harsh characteristics of state and culture now shown to be not just Roman but common to all the ancient Mediterranean great powers, all the second-rank powers, and even many minor states as well, not so much within the specific pathological development of each state (what the political scientists call “unit-attribute” theory), but rather proposes that these characteristics were caused primarily (though not solely) by the severe pressures on all states deriving from the harsh nature of the interstate world in which they were forced to exist.

In other words: the cruel characteristics of the interstate system exerted significant pressures, over time, both upon the internal cultures and upon the interstate behavior of both Rome and all other states within the system. Roman militarism and aggressiveness were intense; perhaps from a modern perspective they seem pathological; and they were certainly crucial factors in Roman success. No one will deny that last point.

4. Harris 1979: esp. chaps. 1–3, 5.

5. Hence the narrative of Roman wars presented in Harris 1979: chap. V. On status-quo, revisionist, and “unlimited revisionist states, see below, chap. 2.

But it is also true that none of those characteristics was unique to Rome—which suggests in turn that they did not arise out of something specially pathological in Roman culture.

The modern scholarly concentration upon the (negative) characteristics of Roman society and culture, and its focus upon the aggressive stance of Rome—and Rome alone—toward the world, probably derives ultimately from the tradition of hostile analysis of successful imperialism in the modern world founded by John A. Hobson (himself a trained classicist), at the turn of the twentieth century, in *Imperialism: A Study*. Perhaps, too, it derives from the fragmentation of the historical discipline into introverted and isolationist national (i.e., unit) subdisciplines, where it is natural to concentrate primarily and very intensely upon the characteristics of the society that one studies, so that the outside world tends to become rather a blank or a mere backdrop.<sup>6</sup> But if Rome in fact shared its heavily militarized, bellicose, and aggressive characteristics with all the other great states in the ancient Mediterranean with which it competed for survival and power, and which it eventually defeated (as well as with medium-sized states and even small states), then the explanation for the rise of Rome cannot lie simply in the fact that Rome was heavily militarized, bellicose, and aggressive.

The major theme of this monograph is, then, that the Mediterranean interstate system, when considered as a whole, was structurally what modern political scientists call a “multipolar anarchy”; that it possessed little or no international law, and was regulated solely by complex and fluid balances of power (primarily, and very crudely, military power); and that the compelling pressures toward bellicosity and aggressiveness exerted by this exceptionally harsh and competitive interstate environment upon all the states within it are visible throughout the entire warlike history of Mediterranean interstate life. This is the case both in European Greece and the eastern Mediterranean as well as in Italy and the western Mediterranean.

A word is needed at this point regarding general issues of terminology. It is true that although I refer throughout this study to a Mediterranean-wide anarchy, in fact in each chapter I analyze the characteristics only of various regional state-systems: Classical Greece and the Aegean; then

6. Hobson 1902 is the founding document of the scholarly tradition that finds the explanation for imperial expansion in the socioeconomic distortions and pathologies of the imperial society (in this case, Victorian Britain). The dangers of introverted and isolationist national historiographies for explaining the complexities of imperial expansion: see, e.g., Bayly 1988: 14–15.

the Hellenistic eastern Mediterranean; then Italy, followed by the western Mediterranean. This is different from approaching the entire Mediterranean as itself a single system. Only in chapter 7 do I arrive (with Polybius) at the consolidation of the Mediterranean world into a single anarchic state-system involving the interaction of all polities from Spain to Syria. The decisive event here occurred with the Roman decision of 201–200 B.C. to intervene strongly in developments in the Greek East. Yet although each of chapters 3, 4, and 5 below describes the workings of a separate regional anarchic state-system within the Mediterranean, at all times from roughly 750 B.C. to about 188 B.C. the Mediterranean as a whole displays a general situation best described as anarchy. It is not yet, strictly speaking, a single anarchic system of states, because the regions are going their own ways separately and are having their own wars, wars with little impact beyond their own regions; they have not yet combined into a single continually interactive system. But viewed broadly, the Mediterranean world is quite clearly a general anarchy built up from the regional anarchic state-systems.

An important subtheme in this study, however, is that the regional system of states in the eastern Mediterranean after 207 B.C. specifically experienced what scholars of international relations call a “power-transition crisis”: a crisis brought about by the unexpected collapse of the power of one of the main pillars of the Hellenistic multipolar system, Ptolemaic Egypt. The Roman decision of 201–200 B.C. to intervene aggressively in the Greek East, taken at a time when the Roman Republic had just emerged as the predominant power in the western Mediterranean, is sometimes seen as a classic example of Roman imperialism, meant in the most negative sense: having conquered the West, the Romans now turned immediately to the East, in an intentional step-by-step conquest of the world by an exceptional international predator.<sup>7</sup> Now, the Roman intervention certainly led to the beginning of Roman military and political hegemony in the eastern Mediterranean. But in good part this Roman intervention was a response to the general systemic crisis brought about by the collapse of the Ptolemies, as Theodor Mommsen, one of the great pioneers of Roman studies, recognized long ago in the first volume of his *Römische Geschichte*.<sup>8</sup> Nor was Rome the only state to act

7. See Veyne 1975: 833–46; Harris 1979: 212–18; Mandel 1989: 89–94, and 1991: 37–42; Derow 1991: 261–70; Habicht, 1995/1997: 185, cf. 194–95; Heftner 1997: esp. 186 and 317.

8. Mommsen 1907: 697–700. Emphasized by Raditsa 1972: 564–65.

under the pressures generated by this great crisis. The large-scale attacks of Philip V of Macedon and of the Seleucid king Antiochus III the Great against the Ptolemaic state, beginning in 203/202 B.C. and accelerating in violence thereafter, were, equally, responses to that systemic crisis—highly aggressive, and increasingly so. The actions of several Greek states—at least four of them—in sending ambassadors to Rome to call upon the Romans for help against Philip and Antiochus in this threatening situation were, similarly, crucial responses to the crisis. In other words: every state here was in one way or another responding to the ongoing general crisis, and they were all responding to it simultaneously and indeed synergistically. The focus should not be on Rome alone—as it has been. The Roman Senate, for complex reasons, decided to answer the Greek pleas for help in the affirmative, and to intervene; but Roman intervention did not cause the crisis in the East. Well before the Roman intervention, the entire eastern Mediterranean was already at war from the northern Aegean to the frontiers of Egypt itself.

To attribute a crucial role in the expansion of Roman power and influence to the characteristics of the international system in which the Roman Republic existed, to the significant pressures toward aggressive state action that this harsh environment placed upon all states within it (resulting in a synergistic interaction of multiple aggressive and warlike polities simultaneously)—that is, to attribute strong causative power to the structural dynamics of the overarching system, rather than to focus attention solely upon Roman behavior (as modern scholars have so often done), is to adopt the approach of a dominant school of thought in the modern study of international relations. That school of thought is a family of closely related (and occasionally competing) theories, based on a common core of grim tenets concerning the international life of states. Its branches go by various names: classical realism, neorealism, structural realism, contextual realism, dynamic realism, defensive and offensive realism. But the movement is also increasingly called simply and broadly the “Realist” approach to international relations (which is actually a return to an old terminology), and for the sake of simplicity it is “Realism” that will generally be used in this monograph.<sup>9</sup>

9. The Realist school as a family of related (yet competing) theories that share core hypotheses: Wayman and Diehl 1994b: 3–26; Rose 1998: 144–72; cf. Lynn-Jones 1998: 157–59. Realist paradigms as the dominant research program in international-relations studies: see, e.g., Kapstein and Mastanduno 1999: ix–x. Not that Realism has gone unchallenged: see below, chap. 2. I find myself most comfortable with the subschool called “offensive” Realism, which especially stresses the enormous systemic pressures upon all

Although Realist paradigms of interstate behavior constitute a dominant approach in modern studies of international relations, the conceptual framework and theoretical insights of Realism have only rarely and superficially been applied to the study of the state-systems of the ancient Mediterranean. And they have never been applied in detail to the study of Roman expansion. This is because most scholars of the ancient world know little or nothing of the vast Realist theoretical literature on international relations and the historical case studies attached to it, while conversely most Realist theoreticians lack a sophisticated knowledge of Mediterranean antiquity.<sup>10</sup> The only important exception to this lack of communication between historians of Mediterranean antiquity and scholars of international relations is an excellent collection of essays dealing primarily with the Peloponnesian War, *Hegemonic Rivalry: From Thucydides to the Nuclear Age*, edited by the ancient historian Barry Strauss and the political scientist Richard Ned Lebow. Yet this potentially important book has had no intellectual impact on ancient studies—and it is now out of print and almost unobtainable.<sup>11</sup>

The failure of communication between political scientists and modern historians of Rome is unfortunate, for Realist concepts of state interaction have much to contribute to our understanding of the emergence of Roman hegemony first in Italy and then in the Mediterranean. Episodes of revolutionary change always lend themselves to controversy; but our understanding of them can be significantly deepened by studying them in a theoretically informed manner.<sup>12</sup> Conversely, the ability of Realist ideas concerning the interactions of states within interstate systems to help explain the rise of Rome first in Italy, then in the western Mediterranean, and then in the Mediterranean as a whole may help to confirm, via a specific and complex case study, the general validity of Realist paradigms. This is important: political scientists note that because major systemic transformations occur only rarely, the number of case

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states in anarchic state-systems to expand their power and influence. Latest advocate of offensive realism: Mearsheimer 2001, esp. chap. 2.

10. Brief discussions of Roman expansion under the Republic couched in political-science terminology: Liska 1978: 11–14; Gilpin 1981: 99–100 and 146–47; Doyle 1986: 82–91; Little in Buzan et al. 1993: 144–50. Typical of the lack of communication between political scientists and ancient historians, Little wrongly refers to the subject allies of Athens as its “colonies” (144), a term with a completely different meaning in ancient studies than in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European imperialism. Worse: Liska 1978: 12–14 continually refers to “King Antioch,” which is to mistake Antiochus III for his capital city.

11. Lebow and Strauss 1991; earlier: Fliess 1966—another work that is rarely cited.

12. See the comments of Wollforth 1994/1995: 127.

studies on which to test their hypotheses about fundamental systemic transformations is all too small.<sup>13</sup> With regard to the general interactions of states under a militarized multipolar anarchy, and with regard specifically to the interactions of states during a power-transition crisis, here, then, is a major new test case, and one previously ignored by the political scientists, who simply do not know about the crisis that convulsed the eastern Mediterranean after 207 B.C. Thus it is missing from Robert Gilpin's survey of violent system transformations, though both the Peloponnesian War and the Second Punic War are included, and it is missing also from the surveys of violent system transformations in both Michael Doyle's study of empires (though the conflicts both between Athens and Sparta and between Rome and Carthage appear) and from Barry Buzan, Charles Jones, and Richard Little's study of the impact of anarchy upon state conduct (though again both the Peloponnesian War and the Second Punic War appear).<sup>14</sup> Yet the systemwide crisis brought about by the sudden collapse of the Ptolemaic state after 207, leading to the intervention of Rome in the Greek East, is a case that ought to be considered by political scientists and included in their repertoire.

In constructing a model of complex events that emphasizes how an important new causal factor should be considered, one runs an inherent risk that other factors will be pushed toward the background. But in applying international-relations theory to the long-standing multipolar anarchy in which Rome came into existence (starting with the Classical Greek city-states and proceeding to a study of the Hellenistic Mediterranean both in the East and in the West), and in applying the theory of power-transition crisis to the situation in the Hellenistic Mediterranean after 207 B.C., the goal is not to show that a system-level explanation offers a complete explanation of the revolutionary events that occurred. No theorist of international relations argues that the nature of the system within which states exist, or pressure from the structure and characteristics of that system, provides by itself a full explanation of specific interstate behavior.<sup>15</sup> Human decisions are still made by individual hu-

13. Complaints about the paucity of testable cases for Realist hypotheses concerning major system transformation (one result being a constant flow of Realist studies on the outbreak of the First World War); see, e.g., Wohlforth 2000: 127 and 132 (with further references).

14. Gilpin 1981: chap. 5; Doyle 1986; Buzan et al. 1996. The absence from these works of the crisis initiated by the collapse of the Ptolemies is a by-product of the fact that Hellenistic history after the death of Alexander the Great is itself little known to historians beyond the Hellenistic specialists.

15. See, e.g., Waltz 2000: 24.

man beings (those who constitute, in one form or another, the decision-making elite); more broadly, the political cultures within which human beings make those decisions are quite specific and hugely influential on those decisions, and those cultures vary one from another. Theorists do argue, however, that the nature of the interstate system offers an important part of the story, for structural pressures encourage certain types of state actions while discouraging other types. And since international-systems theory has never been applied to the study of the rise of Rome, an examination of the nature of the state-systems within the ancient Mediterranean as entities with their own important characteristics and their own types of crises can provide a new perspective on both long-term developments and specific crucial events.

In other words, Realist theory offers us an additional factor to consider when attempting to explain both the long-term process of the emergence of Roman power and the revolutionary events that occurred in the late third century. It enables us to improve our understanding of what occurred. It also enables us to improve our understanding of the nature of the Romans' achievement. No claim is being made here that historians writing about interstate relations in antiquity should abandon other approaches—only that the family of Realist international-relations theories has valuable insights to offer students of international relations in all periods, and that it has powerful heuristic value for the study of Roman Republican interstate relations. This is especially because recent discussions of the causes of Roman expansion have focused so strongly on the unit-level type of explanation, rather than the system level, attributing all major interstate outcomes to the behavior of Rome alone, and not paying enough attention to the characteristics and dynamics of international anarchy, to the characteristics of other states within that anarchy, and to the characteristics of the typical (violent) interactions of those states. Scholars of ancient international relations should remember that the fifth-century Hippocratic treatise *Airs, Waters, Places* urged that humans be studied in relation to their environment.

For Realist theoreticians, the following study is important for two reasons. First, it tests the validity of Realist paradigms of interstate interaction in view of the significant criticisms—Neoliberal international institutionalism and radical Constructivism—to which those paradigms have been subjected in the past decade, as they relate to conditions in an arena of study that previously has not come under detailed analysis. Second, it tests the validity of one of contemporary Realism's fundamental claims, the claim to universalism; hence Kenneth Waltz, in *Theory of In-*

*ternational Politics*, one of the founding documents of Realist theory, can write, “The enduring anarchic character of international politics accounts for the striking sameness in the quality of international life through the millennia”; and the prominent theorist Charles Glazer is similar: “states exist in a condition of international anarchy that does not vary.”<sup>16</sup> If Realist analytical claims can be shown to be valid for the ancient Mediterranean world, this would enhance confidence in Realist theories as an explanation across the entire history of international relations. The interstate world of the ancient Mediterranean therefore forms an important test case for Realist claims to be elucidating universal principles of interstate politics.<sup>17</sup> It should be stated here at the beginning that I will argue that although detailed distinctions and qualifications must always be made, the systems of warlike and aggressive states that existed in the ancient Mediterranean conformed from the beginning to the grimmest and most unforgiving of Realist paradigms.<sup>18</sup>

This monograph is an interdisciplinary work, intended for an audience both of ancient historians and of political scientists. The following chapter, chapter 2, sets out for modern historians of antiquity the fundamental hypotheses of contemporary Realist theories concerning the impact of the characteristics of the interstate system upon the behavior of the states within that system, as well as the basic critiques of those theories. Most political scientists will know this material well, but it is foreign to the ancient historians. That chapter also indicates how the approach of this study to ancient international relations is, despite its focus on system dynamics, not monocausal—for it offers a statement on exactly how the Roman Republic was unique as a unit within its environment, and how that unique internal characteristic (which was not exceptional bellicosity, though the Romans were certainly harshly bellicose) was crucial to Roman success. Chapter 3 and then chapter 4 explain the continual relevance of these Realist hypotheses to the political history of the fragmented world of Mediterranean states in both the Classical and

16. Waltz 1979: 66; Glazer 1997: 171. Cf. Doyle 1991: 175 (“the continuity of interstate anarchy”); Elman and Elman 1997: 9 and n. 11, cf. 13–14; and now Copeland 2000: chap. 8 *passim* (esp. 233–34).

17. In fact, Realist claims about intercommunal violence, and the structural causes of such conflict, extend back into the pre-state Neolithic period: see Keeley 1996: 16–17.

18. Thus the debate between offensive and defensive Realism over whether all anarchic interstate systems offer states strong incentives to expand or only some systems do—see now Taliaferro 2000—has no import for the present study, because the ancient Mediterranean system offered very strong incentives for states to expand even under the definitions of defensive Realism.

Hellenistic eras. Chapter 4 also contains a preliminary account of the power-transition crisis that began in the Greek Mediterranean with the unexpected collapse of the Ptolemaic regime after 207 B.C.—a subject to be reconsidered in chapter 7 from the Roman perspective. Chapter 5 then turns to the West and examines, with the help of Realist international-systems theory, the environment of Rome specifically and its interactions with that environment, first (chronologically) among the system of polities of central Italy and then among the system of great powers in the larger world of the western Mediterranean. Chapter 6 then offers a general comparison of the militarized, bellicose, and diplomatically aggressive culture of Republican Rome when set within the broader context of all the states that were forced to exist within the multipolar and heavily militarized Mediterranean anarchy. The chapter focuses on the question of whether Roman exceptionalism—the unique characteristics of this particular ancient state, which led it to exceptional interstate success in the ferocious interstate competition for security and power—lay in the phenomenon of exceptional Roman militarism. Finally, in chapter 7 a different kind of Roman exceptionalism and a different source of exceptional Roman power will be laid out in detail—an exceptionalism correctly underlined (once again) by Theodor Mommsen.<sup>19</sup> This will be followed by a renewed and more detailed discussion of the Roman decision of 201–200 B.C. to intervene in the power-transition crisis in the eastern Mediterranean, and the consequences of that decision (including the wars both with Philip V of Macedon and the later war with Antiochus III the Great) down to 188 B.C.

19. Mommsen 1907: 340–45.