

Sarah H. Davies, *Rome, Global Dreams, and the International Origins of an Empire*. Leiden: Brill, 2019. Pp. xi + 208. ISBN 978-90-04-41190-6 (e-book), ISBN 978-90-04-41226-2 (hardback). €110/\$132.

This work is a significant contribution to the study of a question in increasingly urgent need of an answer—how did Rome’s robust ideology and practice of imperialism originate and evolve? The key, for Davies, lies in the international diplomatic interactions the Romans engaged in with other states in the Mediterranean world in the third and second centuries BC.

In a brief introduction, Davies lays out the epistemology underpinning the book: “normative constructivism,” the intersection of social behaviours with structuration, or “the ideational aspects of envisioning, creating, and legitimizing power structures (on the international level)” (p. 12). She acknowledges her debt to past scholars of Roman imperialism: William Harris on Roman aggressive behaviour, Erich Gruen’s and Arthur Eckstein’s work on the Romans’ sometimes passive attitude toward territorial acquisition, and Eckstein’s application of International Relations (IR) theory to the study of antiquity.¹ Davies then encapsulates the contribution of her theoretical orientation to the study of Roman history using a striking metaphor (p. 13, emphasis in the original):

To put it simply the opening premise for the current study is as follows: in the old cliché about sword and pen, the sword must indeed be mighty, but the *meaning* of its might, the *shape* that it takes, the *directions* that it swings are determined by the might of the pen, by the structuring of norms and ideas. This study seeks to understand the origins of the Roman empire from the angle of the pen.

Borrowing a concept from Richard White,² Davies’ focus is “the middle ground”—“a geographic and temporal ... space ... characterized by the prevalence and creativity of its mutual misunderstandings, which served to generate new meanings and structures” (p. 14).

The book’s first chapter, “Pan-Hellenism Goes Global,” charts the development in the third and second centuries BC of the idea of an *oikoumenē*, the civilized (that is to

¹ p. 10, citing W.V. Harris, *Warfare and Imperialism in Republican Rome, 327-70 BC*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979; E.S. Gruen, *The Hellenistic World and the Coming of Rome*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984; A.M. Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, and *Rome Enters the Greek East: From Anarchy to Hierarchy in the Hellenistic Mediterranean, 230-170 BC*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008. Davies also acknowledges that her work “adds to” (p. 9 n.29) and “responds to” (p. 12 n.39) the present writer’s *Friendship and Empire: Roman Diplomacy and Imperialism in the Middle Republic (350-146 BC)*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. I find very little evidence of this in the text, however. See below.

² R. White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

say, Hellenic) world and the hierarchies within it. Davies demonstrates how the Stoic philosopher Zeno's dream (inspired by the conquests of Alexander the Great) of a global state, a *kosmopolis*, began to be discursively realized during the Hellenistic period through "historical geography," consisting of three "cartographic layers": "experienced cartography" (cognitive maps, travel narratives), "universal cartography" (physical mapping), and "Hellenic cartography" (p. 24), the latter dividing the world hierarchically into Greek and non-Greek. The contemporary intrusion of Roman power into this discursive space, via kinship diplomacy (the citation of common ancestry by states in diplomatic interactions), ultimately resulted in the strange circumstance of a distinctly non-Hellenic (barbarian?) hegemon presiding over the Hellenic *oikoumenē*.

Chapter 2 uncovers "The Problem of Rome's *Politeia*," that is, the fact that its unique republican character meant that Rome was simultaneously a *polis* and, functionally speaking in terms of its great power status in the East, a Hellenistic monarch, which generated unique third-party diplomatic behaviours practiced by the Roman state. "Rome was a *polis*—and yet more than a *polis*," "[l]eading Romans ... moved on a par with, if not above, kings" (p. 63), and "Rome's Senate"—as King Pyrrhus of Epirus once quipped—"was a council (*Boulē*) of kings" (p. 61)—hence the "greater-than-kingly authority" of that august body (p. 64). These phenomena transformed the norms and practices of Hellenistic arbitration: unlike the kings, the senate regarded offers to mediate their disputes with other states with suspicion or outright hostility; the senate nominated itself as arbitrator in disputes involving Rome; and the novel practice of "apologetic deprecation" (p. 75) of the Romans by representatives of a third-party state on behalf of another state became the Romans' preferred method of mediation.

The novelty of Roman power generated further problems, the subject of chapter 3 ("The Majesty of Rome"): Roman behaviour was incongruous with prevailing international diplomatic norms, resulting in fundamental misunderstanding and confusion among eastern states. Three factors demonstrating the problem come into play here: the uniqueness of Roman warfare as legally sanctioned by the gods (and thus, by definition, not subject to third-party arbitration), and ended by *deditio*, absolute surrender, for which the Greeks knew no equivalent; the concept of the *maiestas*, the "greater-ness" (a nod to Susan Mattern³) of the Roman people; and the concepts of *populus Romanus* and *ius* that also failed to map onto their nearest Greek equivalents (*dēmos* and *politeia*). This cultural misunderstanding was resolved by the conceptualization of Rome as a goddess, Roma, a clear sublimation of Rome's unique, "greater-than-kingly" status. Once all these elements coalesced, Zeno's dream (or perhaps nightmare: pp. 102, 120) of a single home state for the world, a *patris*,

³ S.P. Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy: Imperial Strategy in the Principate*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, 210.

presiding over the *oikoumenē* became a reality, but perhaps not in ways contemporary Greeks envisioned or indeed desired.

Chapter 4, “A Cloud from the West,” foregrounds Polybius’ theory of the *anacyclosis* of states and the *symplokē*, or “interwoven-ness” (p. 106) of East and West thanks to Fortune/*Tuchē* favouring the rise of Rome, with contemporary thinking about the rise and fall of empires (e.g., the Hebrew book of Daniel), Rome’s position as a fifth kingdom in a sequence of empires doomed to fall in the apocalyptic literature (e.g., book three of the “Sibylline Oracles”), and critiques of empire (by, e.g., Carneades).

In chapter 5, Davies examines how Polybius accounts for Rome’s rise to global power (the unique intersection of the cycles of *Tuchē* with the strong Roman mixed *politeia* and the moral excellence of its statesmen), and how the extension of his original plan (Books 31-40), a period marked by *tarachē kai kinēsis*, “tumult and destruction,” leads his readers to doubt the longevity of Roman global power. Indeed, Polybius leaves his readers with the strong impression that the destructions of Carthage and Corinth in 146 BC “could be the beginning of the end” of Rome’s *imperium* as its statesmen succumb to the corruption that typically attends imperial power (p. 131).

The final chapter, “*Roma Aeterna*,” performs a close reading of the famous Gemma Augustea, a sardonyx cameo of the early first century AD. Davies uses the cameo to explore how the the third- and second-centuries BC Roman ideology of empire, after a brief moment of self-doubt and soul-searching in the first century (best seen in the “decline-and-fall” pessimism of Cicero and Sallust), reached its apotheosis under Augustus.

Davies’ study is a welcome contribution to the study of Roman diplomacy and imperialism after the “theoretical turn.”⁴ Her central finding that Rome entered the Greek east at a time when the discourse of a global *kosmopolis* was in the air, resulting in Rome engaging with and transforming that discourse, with itself as the new world-state (*patris*), is intriguing and largely convincing.⁵ Although she does not confront the question directly, Davies seems to find the reason for Rome’s imperial success in its deep and peculiar religiosity, part of a “mindset” that saw Rome as “boundless” in which “the legal order ... exist[ed] above all else” (p. 85) because its (always defensive) wars were sanctioned by the gods themselves even before they were undertaken.

Where I part ways with Davies is her insistence on “cultural misunderstandings” in the “middle ground” of Roman diplomatic interactions with the Greeks. Unlike Davies, who regards these concepts as “disjunctive” (p. 50), I believe the Roman

⁴ On this, see my *Roman Imperialism*, Leiden: Brill, 2019, 56–73.

⁵ I find it odd that Davies almost completely avoids using “discourse” and related terms in her discussions of ideational structurings of globalizing ideology.

concept of *fides* maps adequately enough onto Greek *pistis* to prevent misperception, as does *imperium* onto *archē*, *res publica* onto *polis*, *ius* onto *politeia*, *maiestas* onto *dunasteia*, *dēmos* onto *populus*, and *provincia* onto *eparcheia*. Surely any semantic confusion will have been cleared up by centuries of Roman experience of Greeks in Magna Graecia before the period of Rome's overseas expansion.

Also, as I have argued elsewhere, the Greeks knew perfectly well what *deditio in fidem*—absolute surrender to the good faith—entailed, Aetolian false claims to the contrary (and Davies' belief in the Aetolians' allegations: pp. 2–3, 64, 172) notwithstanding.⁶ I also take issue with Davies' notion that “the Romans ... made it clear that they were not amenable to offers of mediation,” an attitude the Greeks found “strange and arrogant” (p. 75). As I have shown elsewhere, as many as thirteen offers to mediate Rome's conflicts with major powers were made between 212 and 189, with only one being met with Roman hostility.⁷ Davies' claims to the contrary are part of a worrying trend that views the Romans as aggressive tricksters, weaponizing their baffling and peculiar diplomatic language and practices against their hapless and confused enemies.⁸

These misgivings aside, engagement with this important work and its main ideas will in future be essential for all scholars of Roman diplomacy and imperialism.

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⁶ See my “Ancient International Law, the Aetolian League, and the Ritual of Surrender during the Roman Republic: A Constructivist View,” *IHR* 31.2 (2009), 244-46.

⁷ Burton, *Friendship and Empire*, 202. The reason this is an issue at all is because the Rhodians famously met with hostility when they confessed they had come to Rome in 168, before Rome's victory over Perseus, in order to broker peace between Rome and the Macedonian king (Polyb. 29.19).

⁸ See S. Dmitriev, *The Greek Slogan of Freedom and Early Roman Politics in Greece*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011; J. Grainger, *Great Power Diplomacy in the Hellenistic World*, London: Routledge, 2017.