Chapter 2: An Empire Across Three Continents

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 If you had lived in the Roman Empire, where would you rather have lived – in the towns or in the countryside? Explain why.

I would choose the towns. The chapter shows that the great Mediterranean cities such as Carthage, Alexandria and Antioch were the bedrock of the empire, and city life offered real advantages. A city might be better provided for during food shortages and famines than the countryside. Galen records that city-dwellers stored a full year's grain after harvest and left peasants only pulses, forcing country people to eat twigs, bulbs and roots in spring. Towns also had public baths and far richer entertainment; one calendar lists shows filling 176 days of the year. The countryside, by contrast, bore the tax burden, and rural indebtedness and debt bondage were widespread. Town life was not free of hardship, but it was safer and more comfortable.

Q2 Compile a list of some of the towns, cities, rivers, seas and provinces mentioned in this chapter, and then try and find them on the maps. Can you say something about any three of the items in the list you have compiled?

Towns and cities: Rome, Carthage, Alexandria, Antioch, Pompeii, Constantinople, Ctesiphon, Dara. Rivers: Rhine, Danube, Euphrates, Nile, Guadalquivir. Seas: Mediterranean, Black Sea, Caspian Sea. Provinces and regions: Spain, Numidia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Byzacium, Campania, Gaul. These can be located on Map 1 (Europe and North Africa) and Map 2 (West Asia). Three examples: (1) The Mediterranean was the heart of Rome's empire, running from Spain to Syria, with Rome dominating the lands on both its northern and southern shores. (2) The Euphrates separated the Roman and Iranian empires by a narrow strip of land, and Trajan marched down it to Ctesiphon in 116 CE. (3) Alexandria was one of the biggest urban centres, famous for its frankincense factories, and Constantinople became Constantine's second capital, surrounded on three sides by sea.

Q3 Imagine that you are a Roman housewife preparing a shopping list for household requirements. What would be on the list?

Drawing on the chapter, the list would centre on the staples traded and consumed in huge quantities: wheat, wine and olive oil. Wheat might come from Sicily, Byzacium (Tunisia) or Egypt; the best wine from Campania; and olive oil from Spain or, later, North Africa. Wine and oil were sold in clay amphorae, so I would note the right containers. Galen also mentions barley, beans, lentils and other pulses stored by city households, so these would go on the list too. Since urban families used money widely, I would carry coins, silver in the early centuries and gold solidi in the later empire. For small luxuries, aromatic frankincense, prepared in Alexandria's factories, could be added.

Q4 Why do you think the Roman government stopped coining in silver? And which metal did it begin to use for the production of coinage?

The Roman government stopped coining in silver because the Spanish silver mines were exhausted, so the government no longer had enough stocks of the metal to support a stable silver coinage. The silver-based currencies of the first three centuries therefore came to an end. Constantine founded the new monetary system on gold instead. He introduced the solidus, a coin of about 4½ gm of pure gold, minted on a very large scale with circulation running into millions. It was so stable that it outlasted the Roman Empire itself. Gold became abundant in late antiquity, and the late Roman bureaucracy drew most of its salary in gold.

Q5 Suppose the emperor Trajan had actually managed to conquer India and the Romans had held on to the country for several centuries. In what ways do you think India might be different today?

This is speculative, but the chapter suggests likely changes. Trajan reached the Persian Gulf in 116 CE and wished he were young like Alexander to sail to India. Under Roman rule, India would probably have been organised into provinces subject to taxation, governed through local upper classes who collaborated with Rome, with cities as the centres of administration. Urbanisation, public baths, amphitheatres and Roman engineering such as aqueducts might have spread. Latin and Greek could have become languages of administration, and Roman law and citizenship might have shaped society. Trade would have grown, but slavery and heavy taxation might have deepened. Christianity might also have spread earlier. India might also have lost its own varied cultural traditions.

Q6 Go through the chapter carefully and pick out some basic features of Roman society and economy which you think make it look quite modern.

Several features look modern. Society: the nuclear family was widespread, adult sons did not live with their parents, and married women could keep their own property, inherit from their fathers and divorce easily by giving notice. Casual literacy existed, as seen in the advertisements and graffiti on Pompeii's walls. Economy: there was a substantial infrastructure of harbours, mines and olive oil factories; commercial and banking networks and widespread use of money; competition between regional producers for markets; and large-scale mining using hydraulic techniques and water power, with output not matched until the nineteenth century. Labour was supervised in teams, factory-like controls were used, and wage labour became common. Urban life had public entertainment, and law restrained even powerful emperors.