



# History on the March

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The winner of the 2022 Graduate Sidgwick Prize addressed the question, “What is the significant and substantial contribution of your thesis/dissertation?”

The obvious falsehood of Francis Fukuyama’s “End of History” has been, once again, starkly illustrated by Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine: empire and imperialism continue to flourish, however uncomfortable such concepts might be for the West. Putin – who increasingly seems to view himself as a modern-day Russian tsar – launched his invasion under the pretence of defence, a familiar pretext for the student of intercommunity relations across the span of history.

Yet lurking behind this façade is a maelstrom of historical imaginings about Russian and Ukrainian history, Kiev itself being the old capital of the *Rus*, which animate Putin’s war. This history takes us as far back as Rome: the title tsar, like that of Kaiser, finds its root in Caesar, one of the titles of the Roman emperors. It is a salient reminder that so many of the ideas around empire and imperialism over the past 1,000 years find their direct origins in the Roman imperial endeavour.



A snapshot of this imperial endeavour, my thesis – *Becoming Kings of the Mediterranean: Maiestas-Ideology and the Expansion of Roman Power c. 300–167 BCE* – offers a new exploration of a scintillating period across the third and second centuries BCE, during which time the Romans went from being a city state fighting its neighbours in central Italy to the ruler of the Mediterranean. After defeating the Carthaginians in two decades-long wars (264–241 BCE and 218–201 BCE), the Romans, continuing their conquests in northern Italy and Spain, turned East and within the space of twelve years had defeated the Macedonian king Philip V and the Seleukid king Antiochus III – probably the most powerful individual in the Mediterranean world at the time.

Up to this point, scholarship of Roman imperialism has been locked into a dichotomous pendulum: swinging between those who view Rome as an aggressive and bellicose predator state and those who regard its expansion ultimately as a defensive response to the dangers of the intercommunity sphere – the latter position recently energised through the application of international relations theory. I instead take an *ideological* approach (with ideology being loosely conceived as encompassing a specific set of ideas and their associated beliefs, values, emotions and discourse) to understanding the amplification of Roman power: that is, recognising that manifestations of power are culturally contingent where material forces are given meaning by the various conceptual boundaries, delineations and categories of contemporary societies. I also treat the Roman empire not as a singular political structure superimposed on the Mediterranean but, to use the words of John Richardson, a “mosaic of imperial modes”.<sup>1</sup> My task, as I perceive it, becomes not so much to establish the causes and definite taxonomies of Roman imperialism as to explore the Roman ideologies which established the parameters of motivations, actions and discourse. The central mass around which this reconceptualisation orbits is *maiestas*-ideology, a term I have coined to capture the belief (at times absolute conviction) in the “greatness”, pre-eminent prestige and superlative status of the *populus Romanus* (the Roman people). This idea permeated through the rich tapestry of Roman life, influencing social psychology and behaviour patterns, shaping conceptions of time and space and providing an interpretative framework through which violence and warfare could be formalised into an ideal, ritualised process.

Throughout, I offer a multiplicity of new observations and reinterpretations: chiefly, that *maiestas*-ideology invited the Romans to view the *oikoumene* (inhabited world) as a culturally bounded competitive space and stage on which to perform: a geography of recognition. In this sense, Roman imperial space should be considered as all the places that a Roman representative or Roman army frequented and, thus, where Roman *imperium* (power) had to be (publicly) respected to establish their superior status. As part of this status performance and image-making the Romans rejected other models of rulership in the East (for example, the

imposition of taxes, the installation of forts and garrisons or the establishment of Roman laws and culture) during this period, resulting in their imperial taxonomy being constituted through flashpoints of contact and existing mainly as an ideological construct created and perpetuated in the discourses of these flashpoints. Therefore, the different discourses emphasising Roman *imperium*, *maiestas* (greatness) and *dignitas* (dignity) both defined Roman power and were the fundamental collective benefit of such power for the Romans. These mesh together to produce a reconceptualisation of Roman imperialism: that we might primarily define Roman imperialism in the East in this period as an attempt through warfare and conquest, by cultivating and indulging in glorifying discourses, by manipulating and adopting narratives, to preserve and seek the effective articulation of Roman greatness.

Zooming out of the specificities of Roman imperialism and opening a dialogue with the wider intellectual sphere, *Becoming Kings* offers a dual contribution. On the one hand, offering an ideology so integral to what the *Imperium Romanum* (Roman Empire) was that it continued to captivate and animate those Roman pretenders from the Middle Ages to the present day: for example, the concept of *maiestas* has filtered into languages across Europe (in English, “majesty”; French, *majesté*; German, *Majestät*; Spanish, *majestad*; and Italian, *maestà*) and it animated the conception of monarchy throughout the Middle Ages. It was in no small part responsible for the bloody conflicts on the Continent during the Middle Ages and Early Modern periods. On the other hand, it exemplifies a new interpretative tool or method with which historians and scholars of modern-day international politics can tease out new insights in their own subjects of study. It will, hopefully, play a part in shifting the current obsession with the “hard realities of power” (a direct inheritance of the Cold War) as a mechanism through which to interpret the past and to understand present conflicts, and instead encourage an exploration of the ideological construction of power, imperial taxonomies and the varied impulse to expand across different societies.

1 J. Richardson, *The Language of Empire: Rome and the Idea of Empire from the Third Century BC to the Second Century AD* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 4.