Rome: From Huts to New Towns

A crucial mobilizing factor for Roman society was the inclusive character of an in-migrant society of people from different ethnic backgrounds. The kings of Rome were from the surrounding cities, the last three being Etruscans, and Rome was one of a cluster of settlements. The inclusive hybrid principle was a strength of Roman society, similar mutatis mutandis to the North American one. It accounted for the extraordinary transformative capacity displayed by Roman civilization over its long history from 759 BCE, the foundation of Rome, to 476 CE, the fall of the Western Roman Empire.

Rome developed from the original small settlement of outlaws in the wetlands around the River Tiber to the opulent global capital of one of the largest empires of world history, with a powerful capability in architecture and the planning of public places. The accumulation of building material in Rome (as well as in other cities) was so huge that it fueled urban building and rebuilding through the centuries. Romans were builders and organizers, with skills and effective mobilizing capacity, which included the ability to subjugate entire populations, exterminate opponents, but also to establish a complex system of relations with allies (socii) playing skillfully with different degrees of integration in the Roman civitas. This mobilizing...
capacity was reflected in the sustainability of the Roman economy, through the construction of important infrastructures, roads, bridges, aqueducts, but also in the greater communicative power and diffuse literacy of the Roman world. It translated also into the generalized importance of the Roman rule of law, the monumentality of Roman public spaces, and, last but not least, the military organization that provided the material leverage for the transformation of Rome from local power to global city (caput mundi).

The concentration of power and wealth which derived from imperial expansion brought with it riches, but also tensions. In addition to slaves, the domestic economy needed a growing number of service classes of artisans, merchants, providers, go-betweens, and workers in transportation, which also meant a substantial animal population to be fed and taken care of. These developments put pressure on the poorer parts of the city, the insulae, with relatively high-rise, dense, and unsanitary buildings. As wealth increased, and Rome became dense and noisy, dirty and dangerous, the upper classes moved out to provincial towns like Pompeii or villas in the surrounding areas, including fairly distant islands like Ventotene where Augustus had an imperial residence (Martinotti, 2009, 2012).

Roman society believed in planting its imprint wherever possible. The concept of potestas romana found its counterpart in the architectural and monumental standardization of a vast area of urban settlements. It is strange that a civilization that was so ruthless in quashing revolts, and so firm in providing a common model, was on the other hand flexible in letting the locals govern themselves. This was part of their inclusive pragmatism, which gave the Romans strength and resilience.

Roman Trier (Augusta Trevirorum)

This Roman city grid can still be seen as the basis of the semis urbain of large parts of Europe: Naples, Pompeii, Syracuse, Mediolanum, Augusta Taurinorum (Turin), and Augusta Praetoria (Aosta) in Italy, Saguntum, Augusta Trevirorum (Trier), Lutetia, Massalia, Aix-en-Provence, Bath, Alba Iulia in Romania, and literally hundreds of other places (sometimes difficult to identify because of changes of name) as far as Apamea or Palmyra in Syria.