Introduction: Roman imperialism reconsidered
The nature of Roman imperialism in the Republican period has been the subject of several recent works. These have stressed the manner in which Rome's competitive political system and her traditionally militaristic culture encouraged the domination of overseas enemies and the conquest of new territory under the leadership of the senatorial elite. Earlier preoccupations with concepts of defensive imperialism and ‘just wars’ have given way to a view of the Romans as essentially an aggressive, acquisitive people whose political leaders depended heavily on the fruits of war to maintain their positions.¹ This historical revision of Roman imperialism has been partly encouraged by a reappraisal, among European historians, of the nature of modern imperial achievements. This paper examines a particular aspect of the representation of imperialism - the way that the suppression of piracy and banditry were used as justifications for Roman imperialism in the Late Republic - and considers the ancient material in the light of modern cases which have been reinterpreted in recent scholarship.

European colonial powers and ‘pirates’
Perhaps the most famous pirates of the Mediterranean in modern history are the Barbary Corsairs, the scourge of the Christian seafarer for more than two centuries. Although the repeated efforts of European navies (particularly those of Britain and France) to suppress the Corsairs are famous, it is less well known that these two countries long tolerated and even encouraged their depredations. Treaties were concluded with the leading Corsair communities to allow the merchants of these powers to travel unmolested, and thus divert the attentions of the Corsairs to the ships of less powerful states. The British and French made occasional attacks on the Barbary coast, to impress the natives with their military power, but for all their posturing they did not attempt to destroy the pirate states entirely.² The preferred position was summed up in an anonymous French government memorandum of the late-eighteenth century:

We are certain that it is not in our interest that all the barbary corsairs be destroyed, since then we would be on a par with all the Italians and the peoples of the North Sea.

(quoted in Earle 1970, 17)

In the early part of the nineteenth century, however, with the abolition of slavery and the intensification of competition for influence and control in North Africa, the French view changed completely. The new approach is
exemplified by an 1819 report from the French Consul in Algiers:

I think that one must pull out this evil by its roots, by besieging the city of Algiers, the soul of the piracy. Once fallen into the hands of Europeans, it would drag down in its wake the whole system of Algerian piracy, and would become a brake to the other barbaric states that still refuse to respect the rights of man.

(quoted in Bono 1964, 75)3

The French occupation of Algiers in 1830 was thus originally justified as an essential measure aimed at suppressing piracy in the region.

At the same time the British, mainly in the guise of the East India Company, tried a similar approach towards their Arab commercial rivals for the shipping trade of the Persian Gulf. The extent to which the activities of the Qawasimi amounted to piracy, rather than the protection of their ships and territories against the marauding forces and allies of the East India Company, is highly debateable. But British officials were zealous in spreading the message that the ‘Joasmees’ were as piratical as their Moslem brethren from North Africa. Captain John Malcolm, the British representative in the Gulf, stated that:

Their occupation is piracy, and their delight murder; and to make it worse they give you the most pious reasons for every villany they commit ... if you are their captives and offer all you possess to save your life, they say, ‘No! It is written in the Koran that it is unlawful to plunder the living, but we are not prohibited in that sacred work from stripping the dead’. So saying they knock you on the head. But then ... that is not so much their fault, for they are descended from a Ghoul or monster.

(quoted in al-Qasimi 1986, xiv)4

The accusations of piratical attacks became more frequent as the British attempted to wrest more of the lucrative carrying trade from their Arab rivals. With the support of the governments of Bombay and India, and the aid of their allies in Muscat, the East India Company eventually reduced the Qawasimi to surrender, and forced them to accept a peace treaty which formally labelled them as pirates. The General Treaty with the Arab States of the Persian Gulf (1820), stipulated that:

Art. 1 There shall be a cessation of plunder and piracy by land and sea on the part of the Arabs, who are parties to this contract, for ever.

Art. 2 If any individual of the people of the Arabs contracting shall attack any that pass by land or sea of any nation whatsoever, in the way of plunder and piracy and not of acknowledged war he shall be accounted an enemy of all mankind and shall be held to have forfeited both life and goods. And acknowledged war is that which is proclaimed, avowed and ordered by government against government; and the killing of man and taking of goods without proclamation, avowal and the order of a government is plunder and piracy.

(quoted in al-Qasimi 1986, 225-7)

Rome and the ‘pirates’

The classification of pirates in the General Treaty with the Arab States as ‘enemies of all mankind’ echoes the view of pirates held by Roman
authorities in the Late Republican period. In his eloquent presentation of
the political and moral obligations of the statesman, written in 44 BC, the
Roman politician Cicero has this to say about keeping faith:

If for example, you do not hand over to pirates the amount agreed upon as the
price for your life, this is not perjury, not even if you have sworn an oath and
do not do so, for pirates are not included in the category of lawful enemies, but
they are the enemies of all mankind.

(Cicero Off 3.107)\(^5\)

The perception of pirates as outside the normal conventions of human
relations was not something new in Cicero’s time. Since the fourth century
BC the idea had been accepted in the Classical world that piracy was an evil
affliction which civilized states should oppose and suppress. States which
claimed the right to political leadership often attempted to back up their
claims with evidence of their participation in the ‘war’ against pirates.\(^6\) For
the Roman magistrates who led armies of conquest in the Mediterranean
region in this period there was, therefore, a potential justification for their
actions in the suppression of bandits and pirates.

An early example of an opponent of Roman imperialism being described
as a bandit is the Iberian chieftain Viriathus. In the mid-second century BC
Roman provincial governors conducted numerous campaigns against
Iberian tribes and communities, and these campaigns have become
notorious examples of aggressive, imperialistic warfare.\(^7\) The ancient sources
are often candid about the ignoble motivations of the Roman commanders
in Spain in this period, but they also portray their chief enemy as an
uncivilized bandit whose followers are little better than wild beasts (Appian
Iberica 60-75; Strabo Geographia 3.4.5).

A similar accusation is levied against the late second century BC
inhabitants of the Balearic Islands, whom the Epitomator of Livy describes
in a fashion which suggests that they are relatively harmless. Indeed, they
present a familiar picture to thousands of modern tourists:

Another thing contained in this book is the achievement of Q Metellus against
the Baleares, who the Greeks call ‘nudists’, because they spend the summer
lying around naked.

(Livy Periochae 60)

Nevertheless, the Romans attacked the islands in 123 BC under the
command of the consul Q Caecilius Metellus, who seems to have been
assigned Nearer Spain as his provincia. The Baleares, mostly armed only
with slings according to the Epitomator, were driven into the hills ‘like
bellowing cattle’ and were virtually eradicated in a search and destroy
operation. Metellus then settled 3,000 ‘Romans’ - presumably veterans - on
Mallorca, and returned to Spain. On his return to Rome in 121 BC he
celebrated a triumph and took the surname ‘Balearicus’ in commemoration
of his conquest.

Writers in the Livian tradition (Florus Epitome 1.43.1-2; Orosius Historiae
adversum Paganos 5.13.1) give the justification for this ruthless campaign as
the suppression of piracy. Strabo, writing in the early first century AD,
suggests that the accusation may have been simply an excuse to justify an act of aggressive imperialism:

On account of the dealings between a few of their worst elements and the pirates, they were all falsely accused, and Metellus, who was surnamed Balearicus, came against them. He it was who founded the cities.

(Strabo Geographia 3.5.1)

Whatever the truth of the matter, it seems clear that Metellus at least wanted to present his expedition as an act of suppression of piracy, although the consequences may have been far worse than the insignificant islanders deserved.\(^8\)

The Romans’ attitude towards piracy in the late-second century BC, and the claim to be entitled to take aggressive actions in order to suppress it, are most clearly spelled out in a statute which has been preserved in two versions from Delos and Knidos. The inscriptions are both translations of a law passed in the early part of 100 BC. This *lex de provinciis praetoriis* deals with arrangements for three provinces in the Eastern Mediterranean - Asia, Macedonia, and Cilicia. In 102 BC the latter region had formed the scene of a campaign by Marcus Antonius the Orator (cos. 99 BC) against ‘pirates’ (Livy Periochae 68; Obsequens Prodigia 44). He too celebrated a triumph after his return to Italy (Plutarch Pompeius 24). The law invites those who are subjects, allies, and friends of the Romans to resist piracy, to prevent the harbours in their territories from being used as bases by pirates, and to assist the Romans in the suppression of piracy. Most significantly, the law expresses the Romans’ right to take aggressive measures to counter piracy:

The senior consul is to send letters to the people and states whom he thinks fit, to say that the Roman people is taking care, that the citizens of Rome and the allies and the Latins and those of the foreign nations who are in a relationship of friendship with the Roman people may sail in safety, and that on account of this matter and in accordance with this statute they have made Cilicia a praetorian province.

*(Lex de provinciis praetoriis KIII, 28-37)*\(^9\)

By designating Cilicia as a praetorian province the law provides for further campaigns in Southern Asia Minor by Roman magistrates, as part of a general policy of eradicating piracy.\(^10\) There were several major military operations in this region by Roman commanders, culminating in the four-year campaign of P Servilius Vatia Isauricus (78-74 BC). His conquests in the mountainous regions of Eastern Lycia, Pamphylia, and Isauria were also celebrated for their success in destroying pirates and bandits in their strongholds (Florus Epitome 1.41.3-4; Strabo Geography 14.5.7; Eutropius Brevarium 6.3).

Some of the Roman commanders were involved in wars with Mithridates of Pontus, but in many cases the objects of these military operations are described as bandits and pirates, deserving of their defeat and destruction at the hands of the Roman commanders such as Antonius, L Licinius Lucullus (Appian Mithridatica 56; Plutarch Lucullus 2), Licinius Murena (Appian Mithridatica 64 & 93; Strabo Geography 13.4.17), and Servilius. Mithridates himself is also presented as a friend and ally of pirates and bandits (Appian Mithridatica 63 & 92).
Servilius, like Antonius before him, celebrated a triumph, the pinnacle of Roman military glory. But the triumph required the return of the general to the city of Rome, which in turn necessitated him travelling through many of the cities and territories of Rome’s friends and allies. Servilius took every opportunity to exhibit his prisoners, in chains and suitably labelled, to demonstrate that the Romans were as good as their word when it came to hunting down bandits and pirates. Thus, in these public displays of the effectiveness of Roman military power, he was able to parade the captured enemies of all mankind to show that his campaign was justified:

One man, P Servilius, captured alive more pirates than all the previous commanders put together. And when did he ever deny to anyone the pleasure of seeing a captured pirate? On the contrary, wherever he went he displayed the most enjoyable spectacle of captive enemies to all and sundry.

(Cicero *In Verrem* Actio Secunda 5.66)

While it cannot be denied that some of the campaigns in Asia minor in this period were genuine attempts to suppress piracy and banditry, it also seems clear that aggressive imperialism was the major driving force behind the activities of the Roman magistrates. The period 102-74 BC saw the gradual extension of Roman territory to include most of Southern Asia Minor, until only parts of Pamphylia and Rough Cilicia remained outside of their control.\(^{11}\)

Within a few years of Servilius’ triumph another Roman commander was forced to come to terms and surrender to the enemy after a disastrous attempt at further conquest. This commander was also called M Antonius (son of M Antonius the Orator) and his opponents were the Cretans. The sources once again attempt to justify this act of aggressive imperialism by accusing the Cretans of being pirates and allies of Mithridates, although they were formally allies of Rome (Appian *Sicilia et Insulae* 6; Florus *Epitome* 3.7; Diodorus *Bibliotheca* 40.1; Dio Cassius *Frag* 108). Florus even claims that Antonius’ ships carried more chains for his piratical captives than weapons for his soldiers (Florus *Epitome* 3.7.2). Antonius’ expectations of a quick, easy victory were not realized. In spite of their long history of internal rivalries the Cretan cities, under the leadership of a certain Lasthenes, successfully resisted the invasion, defeating Antonius in a sea battle off Kydonia.

This reverse, coinciding with a difficult stage of the struggle against Mithridates, appears to have caused considerable embarrassment to the senatorial leadership at Rome. The Cretans tried to forstall further action and renew their alliance with Rome. They won over a majority in the senate, who voted to absolve them of all charges of treachery and declare them friends and allies of Rome, but the populace wanted revenge and the tribune Lentulus Spinther vetoed the senatorial decree. A demand for the surrender of ships and hostages (including Lasthenes) was made, which the Cretans rejected. War followed, justified to the wider Mediterranean world by renewed accusations that the Cretans had helped Mithridates by providing mercenaries and sheltering pirates (Diodorus *Bibliotheca* 40.1; Appian *Sicilia et Insulae* 6.2). Roman forces, commanded by Q Caecilius Metellus, invaded
Crete in 69 BC and after a long, bitter struggle involving several sieges, reduced the whole island to submission (Dio 36.18-19; Livy Periochae 98-99; Appian Sicilia et Insulae 6.2). The island was incorporated into a new province with Cyrene in 66 BC.

While Metellus was completing his conquest of Crete, another campaign against pirates was launched under the command of Cn Pompeius Magnus. He was commissioned to clear the seas of pirates, and given substantial resources of men, money, and ships under a law proposed by the tribune A Gabinius in 67 BC. Although the ancient sources portray the growth of piracy in the Mediterranean as a general menace, it seems clear that what prompted the decision to launch a major campaign was the threat which the pirates posed to the food supply of the city of Rome:

Their power was felt in all parts of the Mediterranean, so that it was impossible to sail anywhere and all trade was brought to a halt. It was this which really made the Romans sit up and take notice. With their markets short of food and a great famine looming, they commissioned Pompey to clear the pirates from the seas.

(Plutarch Pompeius 25.1)

Pompey’s campaign was brief, but spectacularly successful. In three months he secured the seas around Italy and then invaded and conquered Cilicia, receiving the surrender of the pirate leaders. The secret of his success seems to have lain, however, in a remarkable willingness to come to terms with the enemy. Unlike Servilius and Metellus, who reduced their opponents to submission by fighting and hard sieges, Pompey, anxious to obtain a quick victory to further his own political career, offered a general amnesty in return for immediate surrender. So attractive did his terms prove that even some of the cities and communities in Crete, who were under attack from Metellus, tried to surrender to Pompey instead. Meanwhile Pompey himself, through a law of the tribune Manilius, obtained the command against Rome’s principal enemy in the East, Mithridates. Cicero’s speech of 66 BC (Cicero De Imperio Cn. Pompeii 28-33), delivered in support of Manilius’ proposal, shows how an operation which was presented as intended for the suppression of piracy could be used to further the political career of the Roman magistrate in charge. It is clear that Pompey did not, as Cicero claimed, clear the Mediterranean of pirates, but he did enable the Romans to incorporate more territory into their rapidly expanding empire as a result of his conquest of Cilicia.12

A final example of Roman provincial commanders exploiting the war against pirates to justify acts of imperialism comes from the career of Gabinius, the politician who as tribune proposed Pompey’s extraordinary command of 67 BC. Gabinius was proconsul of Syria from 58 to 55 BC. His proconsulship was most notorious for the restoration of Ptolemy XII Auletes to the throne of Egypt, an operation which necessitated him leaving his province with an army in order to drive out the usurper Archelaus. In a speech in defence of C Rabirius Posthumus, Cicero tells us how Gabinius defended his actions:
Gabinius said that he had done it for the sake of the Republic, since he was worried about the fleet of Archelaus, because he thought he might fill the sea with pirates.

*(Cicero *Pro Rabirio Postumo* 20)*

Few of Gabinius’ fellow senators would have believed this excuse, especially as they knew how much money Ptolemy had been offering to various politicians to induce them to aid his return, but it might have been a useful way of convincing allies and subjects that there was something more than imperialistic greed behind the venture.\(^{13}\)

**Conclusion**

Modern scholars have now largely abandoned the notion of defensive imperialism in the Roman Republic. Instead the wars waged by the representatives of the Roman Senate and People are seen to have an essentially aggressive and acquisitive nature, fuelled by the competitive culture of Late Republican politics. Yet even at the height of imperial expansion Roman traditions did not normally permit the open expression of such goals. Although most of our sources date from the imperial period, or later, they are based on earlier accounts and the explanations they offer of Roman motivations can be assumed to reflect contemporary pronouncements quite closely. They indicate that the justification of these wars was still very often framed in terms of a defensive ideology, one which presented Rome and her commanders as the protectors of the weaker civilized states of antiquity against a common enemy.\(^{14}\)

An important reason for the Romans’ insistence that many of their campaigns were conducted against pirates and bandits was the need to justify them to their friends and allies. The forces engaged in these operations were often drawn from Rome’s non-Italian subjects and allies, or financed and supplied by them. In particular, the Hellenistic Greek cities and federations of the Eastern Mediterranean were called upon to provide men, ships, rations, and special taxes in order to keep the Roman war machine going.\(^{15}\) Publicly stressing the continuing need to suppress piracy and banditry was an important way of justifying these demands. It was a justification which the Western European colonial powers were to exploit in a similar fashion hundreds of years later.

**Footnotes**

1. Foremost in the revision of Roman imperialism in the Republican period has been Harris 1979; see also North 1981, Richardson 1986, and Rich 1993.


4. Malcolm is here quoting remarks which he attributes to a Persian servant. al-Qasimi 1986 offers a passionate defence of the Qawasimi case, including a full catalogue of all the incidents of piracy.

5. Compare Cicero’s indignant remarks in his speech against the corrupt governor CVerres, whom he claims allowed a captured pirate captain to avoid public trial and punishment:
What is the law in this case? What do custom and precedent say? Could any one, private individual keep within the walls of his own house the bitterest and most dangerous enemy of the Roman people, or rather, the common enemy of all peoples.

(Cicero In Verrem Actio Secunda 5.76)

The term Cicero commonly uses for pirate is praedo, which can also mean bandit; the two were not always differentiated in Classical literature.

6 See de Souza 1995a, 189-93 for further details.

7 See Richardson 1986.

8 Morgan 1969 suggests that the whole episode may have been linked to political manoeuvres to do with the tribunate of C Gracchus.

9 This quotation is taken from a new translation in Crawford (ed) 1995.

10 By this period in Roman history the term province (provincia) had begun to have a dual meaning. It was used to designate both the sphere of responsibility for a magistrate (eg ‘the war against Mithridates’) and also a conquered territory governed by a proconsul. In the lex de provinciis praetoris Cilicia is refered to as a province in the former sense, rather than the latter.


12 In this speech, Cicero portrays Pompey’s achievements in Cilicia as comparable to the conquests of Republican heroes like Scipio and Marius, who defeated powerful enemies and added new provinces to the Republican Empire. For the continuation of piracy soon after 67 BC in regions where Pompey had supposedly eradicated it, see Cicero Pro Flacco 28-33; Dio Cassius Historia Romana 39.56.1 & 59.2.

13 See Sherwin-White 1984, 271-75. Ten years later accusations of banditry and piracy were still being levelled by ambitious Roman politicians against their Egyptian opponents: Caesar Bellum Civile 3.110 & 112.


15 See Brunt 1971, Chs 23-25 for estimates of the size and composition of Roman armies in this period. The burdensome exactions of Marcus Antonius in both the Eastern and Western Mediterranean from 74-72 BC are well documented: see Cicero In Verrem Actio Secunda 3.213-15; IG IV. 932 & V.1.1146.

References
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