



World archaeology

Archaeology: Pompeii and the Roman Empire

Phil Perkins

Empires can be thought of as a form of social and political organisation that is larger than a state. States are only rarely isolated. They usually have neighbours, and these neighbours are other states, or polities, as they are sometimes called. Interaction, collaboration and rivalry between neighbouring polities can be a positive force, creating innovation and a dynamic society and culture. But if states grow and become more successful and powerful, they may come into direct competition for resources or influence with neighbouring states, and this often leads to conflict. Warfare seems to be an inseparable partner with states, and when a state goes to war, and conquers its neighbour or neighbours, an uneven balance of power is created, with a dominant central state controlling a peripheral series of neighbouring states. One state may conquer another, but is dominance enough to create an empire?

Chris Scarre

An empire usually, if not always, comes about through military dominance, and so one feature will be to maintain secure control over the territories it has conquered, so there is a military aspect to it.

Phil Perkins

Chris Scarre is Professor of Archaeology at Durham University. He is also the editor of *The Human Past*.

Chris Scarre

One of the marks of an empire, one of the key features, is their wide geographical extent. They tend to have centralised political and strategic functions, so that they will usually have some sort of military structure to them, which may be focused mainly on control of the frontiers. Another feature will be governance, because the structure of an empire usually implies that the provinces are being seen as the source of resources – of tribute, of tax, or something of that kind – and so you will often have the distinctive cultural mark of the governing society. So the Assyrian Empire, for instance, you will find Assyrian provincial capitals, which would have had Assyrian governors or functionaries, and they will contain Assyrian-style small palaces. Other features of empires, well, even in early cities you will find evidence for multi-ethnic, multi-racial populations. But there is a sense, of course, in which an empire – being larger in geographical extent and often expanding through conquest into other areas – is much more ethnically and linguistically diverse. And so on top of that, and in addition to the need for secure control, you will also have very carefully managed imperial propaganda, you may put it in that

way. So, for instance, in many empires, the Roman Empire for instance, you will have the portrayal of imperial rulers in positions of prestige.

Phil Perkins

So it seems that military might and a strong central figure are important constituents of an empire. But what impact might an empire have on the settlements it conquers? A good place to start is possibly the most famous Roman city – Pompeii.

Rick Jones

Pompeii sits most obviously beneath Mount Vesuvius, a few miles from the mountain. And it used to be in ancient times right next to the Bay of Naples. But the eruption extended the sea line a bit so we are now a little bit further from the water. It was a port and part of the complex of rich places that were around the Bay of Naples in antiquity.

Phil Perkins

Rick Jones, a Reader in Archaeology at Bradford University, has been leading specialist excavation work at Pompeii for over a decade. I asked him about the city and its place in the empire.

Rick Jones

Pompeii is obviously a very unusual, not entirely unique but almost unique, site in the sense that we know the day, 24th August AD 79, when it was destroyed. The destruction does produce a quite different perception on what the place was like. We are working on a block called Insula 61, which is right by the Herculean Gate in Pompeii, in the northwest corner of the city. It was one of the parts of the city that was first cleared in the late eighteenth century, so it was one of the first areas where houses were exposed, so it has been open for two hundred years or more. We are studying in detail the standing remains, but most importantly we are also excavating below the surfaces of the floors of AD 79 to discover the full history and background of when the place became a city, really, the whole history of life within the city, which spreads back about four centuries. And that was not really done. In fact, the first modern phase of below-surface excavation really only began in the nineties on a big scale.

Phil Perkins

Rick's deeper excavation and recording of the surviving buildings has enabled him to reconstruct the story of the early development of the city pre-AD 79. These earlier layers reveal an important part of the story in terms of the Roman Empire.

Rick Jones

What we do have is the remains of the attack by a Roman general in what is then the Republic that brings Pompeii into the Roman direct political system in about – well, the attack is in 89 BC. What he did was throw stone missiles, stone balls, catapult balls and things, and lead slingshot at the city from outside. Some of them hit the defensive walls. The ones that went over the top of the wall landed on our block, and when you get big rocks landing on the top of the house, the house gets the roof caved in. They eventually cleared

that up, but it was open as a bomb site for about half a century. So we can actually map the destructive effects of the Roman attack. But when you look at the changes that subsequently follow, they are not dramatic. There are dramatic changes to some of the public buildings in Pompeii, the public face of the city changes a bit. And other things change, like the measurement units and the language changes, but it's already, long before that, part of the Italic world, of which Rome is just one of the parts. So, it's not a dramatic change of culture within Italy.

Phil Perkins

So, even though the city was now politically dominated by Rome, when Pompeii was conquered there was not a dramatic change in the city because there were already shared features of culture between Rome and Pompeii, being not that far apart. But are there any later changes as the Roman Empire continued to expand beyond Italy?

Rick Jones

The question of empire in relation to Italy is quite a difficult one because, on the one hand, Rome spreads its influence through military conquest, as it always does. But it then absorbs it and Italy, including Pompeii, becomes part of the core of the empire and not a distant province. It's a small city compared to Rome, but it's not out in the wilder provinces, like in parts of Spain or North Africa or Britain or something.

Phil Perkins

In Italy, then, there was a violent episode when Rome conquered, annexing new lands to its empire, but in Pompeii at least this doesn't seem to have even disrupted or significantly changed the conquered society.