The Romans and Universal History

Polybius

The expansion of Rome from a city-state to a world empire represented the culmination of the universalistic sweep of the Hellenistic era. Like Alexander’s empire before it, the Roman Empire incorporated many different nationalities and regions into a transnational, multicultural world-state.

The life of the Greek historian, Polybius, reflected these momentous developments. Fighting for the Greeks against the Romans during their conquest of Greece, Polybius was captured and sent to Rome as a hostage. Befriended by a group of Roman politicians and writers, Polybius eventually spent the rest of his life in Rome and traveled throughout the Roman Empire. Towards the end of his life he set out to write a “universal history” of Rome’s conquest of the world. In the introduction to his 44-volume history, Polybius explored the context and significance of the Roman achievement.

Points to Consider:
1. How did Polybius compare the Roman Empire with previous empires?
2. What, for Polybius, was the chief historical significance of the Roman Empire?

There can surely be nobody so petty or so apathetic in his outlook that he has no desire to discover by what means and under what system of government the Romans succeeded in less than fifty-three years [220 to 167 B.C.E.] in bringing under their rule almost the whole of the inhabited world, an achievement which is without parallel in human history. Or from the opposite point of view, can there be anyone so completely absorbed in other subjects of contemplation or study that he could find any task more important than to acquire this knowledge?

The arresting character of my subject and the grand spectacle which it presents can best be illustrated if we consider the most celebrated empires of the past which have provided historians with their principal themes, and set them beside the dominion of Rome. Those which qualify for such a comparison are the following. The Persians for a certain period exercised their rule and supremacy over a vast territory, but every time that they ventured to pass beyond the limits of Asia they endangered the security not only of their empire but of their own existence. The Lacedaemonians [Spartans] after contending for many years for the leadership of Greece at last achieved it, but were only able to hold it unchallenged for a bare twelve years. The rule of the
Macedonians in Europe extended only from the lands bordering the Adriatic to the Danube, which would appear to be no more than a small fraction of the continent. Later, by overthrowing the Persian Empire, they also became the rulers of Asia; but although they were then regarded as having become the masters of a larger number of states and territories than any other people before them, they still left the greater part of the inhabited world in the hands of others. They did not even once attempt to dispute the possession of Sicily, Sardinia or Africa, and the most warlike tribes of western Europe were, to speak the plain truth, unknown to them. The Romans, on the other hand, have brought not just mere portions but almost the whole of the world under their rule, and have left an empire which far surpasses any that exists today or is likely to succeed it. In the course of this work I shall explain more clearly how this supremacy was acquired, and it will also become apparent what great advantages those who are fond of learning can enjoy from the study of serious history...

*History is Connected*

In earlier times the world’s history had consisted, so to speak, of a series of unrelated episodes, the origins and results of each being as widely separated as their localities, but from this point onwards history becomes an organic whole: the affairs of Italy and of Africa are connected with those of Asia and of Greece, and all events bear a relationship and contribute to a single end. This, then, is the reason why I have chosen that specific date as the starting-point for my work. For it was after their victory over the Carthaginians in the [Second Punic War] that the Romans came to believe that the principal and most important step in their efforts to achieve universal dominion had been taken, and were thereby encouraged to stretch out their hands for the first time to grasp the rest, and to cross with an army into Greece and the lands of Asia....