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Between these two kinds of death

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INTRODUCTION

Between these two kinds of death

As a result of [the barbarians'] dreadful and devastating onslaughts, Britain sent envoys with a letter to Rome, plaintively requesting a military force to protect them and vowing whole-hearted and uninterrupted loyalty to the Roman Empire, so long as their enemies were kept at a distance... The Romans therefore informed our country that they could not go on being bothered with such troublesome expeditions... Rather, the British should stand alone, get used to arms, fight bravely, and defend with all their powers their land, property, wives, children, and, more important, their life and liberty...

As the Romans went back home, there eagerly emerged... foul hordes, like dark throngs of worms who wriggle out of the narrow fissures of the rock when the sun is high... So the miserable remnants sent off a letter again, this time to the Roman commander Aëtius, in the following terms: "To Aëtius, thrice consul: the Groans of the Britons... The barbarians push us back to the sea, the sea pushes us back to the barbarians; between these two kinds of death we are either drowned or slaughtered". But they got no help in return.

St. Gildas
De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae
c.540 AD

The [Afghan government] meeting made the following decisions:

- 1. The Ministry of Defense was assigned to make sure all US special forces are out of the province within two weeks;*
- 2. All the Afghan national security forces are duty bound to protect the life and property of people in Maidan Wardak province by effectively stopping and bringing to justice any groups that enter peoples' homes in the name of special force and who engage in annoying, harassing and murdering innocent people; and*
- 3. Effective from February 24, 2013 onward, the ISAF has to stop all its special force operations in Maidan Wardak province.*

Office of the President
Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
2013

The Romano-British chronicler Gildas, writing almost a century and a half after the final withdrawal from Britain of the last few military, administrative, and judicial personnel of the disintegrating Western Roman Empire, paints a dark portrait of imperial retreat, as the representatives of the erstwhile conquered and oppressed Britons sent pleading letters to the Western *Caesar Augustus* and the *Magister Militum* to come back and save them from the barbarian threat. Some fifteen centuries later we see a stark contrast issuing from the site of so many accusations of modern empire: where representatives of the Britons had begged for the *imperium* to come back, the Afghan executive orders the 'Imperial Grunts' (Kaplan 2006) to go away. The world, according to this latter proclamation, does not need empire.

Comparing the present to the Roman past is almost an academic cliché, an intellectual relic of Whiggish historiography and Victorian interpretivism. But, as Ward-Perkins (2005) argues, the end of the Roman world has been an intellectual phantom in European, and more recently American, political thought for sixteen centuries. For, if Rome – that hegemon which had 'confounded its monarchy with the globe of the Earth'

(Gibbon 1979) – could fall, so too can every political order built since. History has supported both this notion and the notion that, in the place of each empire, another has arisen to take its place. The Goths who extinguished the corrupt and decaying Western Roman Empire in the late Fifth Century were soon styling their kings ‘emperors’, their squabbles with the surviving Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire laying the foundations for the dominant political philosophy of Europe in the Middle Ages – the *translatio imperii* – as Germans, Franks, and Anglo-Saxons declared themselves to be the rightful successors of Rome (Folz 1969). The Age of Discovery took these medieval rivalries to the rest of the world, gradually carving up the planet in a rapacious quest for colonies, commerce, and prestige. In the aftermath of world wars triggered, in part, by the grandstanding of rival superpowers assured of their right and duty to impose order upon the world, there have been attempts to exorcise the ghost of empire. But it still haunts us today, with connections between Rome and the modern world proliferating in contemporary academic discourse (Schiavone 2000). As Stephen Howe (2002) highlights, we continue to wrestle with the legacies of imperialism, even as our world faces what growing numbers of scholars term the ‘Dismantling of the West’ (Bugajski 2009) in the face of the ‘Limits of Power’ (Bacevich 2008), ultimately threatening to trigger ‘The End of the West’ (Anderson, Ikenberry, and Risse 2008). We might be forgiven, in the face of such predictions, for drawing a parallel with Gildas’ grim portrayal of the fall of the Roman world.

The Rome of Gildas’ chronicle was no longer the world-spanning superpower of Cincinnatus, Caesar, and Severus, but a shrunken and exhausted realm which had barely survived the 200s AD (Southern 2001). The Crisis of the Third Century was undeniably real, a period when the Roman world was tested by a series of changes and calamities in all aspects of society: constitutional, military, financial, diplomatic, commercial, religious, societal, and even environmental. Devaluation of the currency and a fall in commerce, poor relations with external powers and uneasy alliances with stronger rivals in the East, increasing political polarisation between rival factions in Rome (Heather 2007), the spread of religions viewed unfavourably by the *status quo* (Goldsworthy 2009), a growing mistrust and mutual suspicion between the two halves of the Empire (James 2006), and a widening gap between increasingly rich, tax-exempt landowners and increasingly impoverished peasants dependant upon state handouts (MacMullen 1976), their dwindling tax revenues haemorrhaged into a bloated military machine which, despite its gargantuan size (Kelly 2006, 10), could not respond adequately to the Empire’s proliferating problems (Ermatinger 2004). These were serious crises to which Senates and Emperors found themselves increasingly incapable of adequate adaptation or management. This is testified by Gildas’ chronicle, in which the monk records that in response to the Britons’ first letter to the embattled Emperor Honorius, the Western Emperor sent not legions but a missive – the infamous *Rescript of Honorius* – advising the beleaguered Britons that they were to look to their own defences. The Britons’ second letter, sent directly to General Aëtius, received no reply at all.

This is a far cry from the effortless subjugation of Britannia under Caesar and Caligula, and from the prosperity of imperial-era Britannia as a rich and secure Western province in which Constantine the Great had marshalled sufficient power to reunify the entire Empire. Moreover, Britain was not the only province to beg for help from the Western Emperor, and Gildas is not alone in describing the grim period of post-Crisis Rome. Similarly, bleak accounts of imperial crisis were left by such men as Eugippius and Victor of Vita (Ward-Perkins 2005, 180, 22), which influenced the gloomy histories written in the post-Roman West by Bede (Winterbottom 1978) and Salvian (Ward-Perkins 2005, 30),

and in the Byzantine East by Zosimus, Procopius (Goldsworthy 2009, 335) and Zonaras (Cameron 1993) bemoaning the passing of Rome. The Crisis, it is clear, was very real. Yet, what made the *events* of the Third Century so painful was, as Ermatinger (2004) and Goldsworthy (2009) argue, the often inflexible *responses* of the Romans. Rather than adapting and accommodating to changing dynamics, the Romans stubbornly clung to an outdated imagination of themselves as the noble guardians of civilisation valiantly fighting ‘bearded, beer-swilling barbarians’ (Kelly 1997) running rampant amidst the marble monuments.

There are similarities today. The period of post-Cold War optimism has gone. The enduring, age-old concern over imposition of order through ‘Hard Power’ (Campbell and O’Hanlon 2006) is now coupled, more than ever, with concern over Western obstinacy regarding political and economic deficits (Hawksley 2009) which have contributed to what Thomas Edsall (2012) has termed the ‘Age of Austerity’. Like the Roman world of the Third Century, the dynamics of our world are shifting, often precisely because of internal contradictions within the dominant social, political and economic model. Military supremacy once afforded by America’s ‘Empire Lite’ (Ignatieff 2003) is diminishing, the until-recent economic incentives of membership in Brussels’ *Imperium Europaeum* (Foster 2013a) are receding, and the political prestige and self-congratulatory status of a seat in NATO is waning (Kuus 2007). The world is not what it once was. America’s legions are following in Roman footsteps, withdrawing on the orders of an increasingly cash-strapped government. The European Union’s expansionist mission threatens to fracture as, like the provinces of Rome, the regions look to individual responses against collective commercial collapse. Like the rarely-appearing Roman *comitatenses* strike-teams recorded by Gildas and Bede, NATO forces or those of NATO members now find themselves making occasional and controversial interventions in various foreign climes before beating a hasty retreat to the metropolitan core. And added to this is the emergence of new hegemonies which anticipate outstripping and outlasting the West (Campbell and O’Hanlon 2006), while the West itself splits, like the Romans, into fractious and mutually suspicious halves (Anderson, Ikenberry, and Risse 2008). But for all the similarities, one contrast is striking. While the sight of the Romans boarding their ships caused representatives of the provincials to scribble desperately for salvation, in the early Twenty-First Century the withdrawal of the legions prompts the sound not of lamentation, but of cautious celebration.

Of course, the nature of empire itself is ambiguous. While Afghanistan has been under foreign occupation for twelve years, Britannia had been part of the Roman world for nearly four centuries, first occupied, then assimilated and, as evidenced by Gildas, finally so Romanised that the liberated natives in 410 AD begged ‘their’ Romans to return. Neither is foreign military occupation of a territory the sole aspect of empire, a fact with which the Romans were more than familiar. As Alejandro Colás (2007) notes, empire might best be thought of as an unfinished wheel: a hub and spokes but no rim. So much can be considered an aspect of empire, and there is no limit to the concept’s reaches. Modern empire does not rely on fixed, physical frontiers. There are clear differences between Rome and our world. Yet, the theme of Roman withdrawal remains pertinent today. Rome withdrew her legions not from strategic or philosophical concerns, but because successive Emperors could not afford to pay for their bloated military machine. It might be said that something similar applies today. Modern leaders may preach the political virtues of self-determination, but it is no coincidence that, like the *Rescript of Honorius*, these values are proclaimed at the same time as the imperial coffers slowly empty.

Like its predecessors *Pax Romana* and *Pax Britannica*, the *Pax Americana* is no longer capable of maintaining security in the world – if it ever was, or indeed if it ever existed in the first place. Yet, while imperial retreat might be applauded, the broader concern, surely, is what replaces imperial order after the legions go home. While the Afghan and Iraqi governments are increasingly active in curtailing the actions of the imperial powers, there remains serious concern as to what sort of society and power structure will emerge. Time Magazine's (2010) infamous cover of a mutilated child bride has done much to symbolize this quandary. For at present, the only apparent alternative to empire is the nation-state – and this is woefully inadequate.

The current Westphalian system of apparently autonomous yet unequal, exploited, and underdeveloped nation-states – a system which Susan Strange (1999) aptly terms 'Westfailure' – is changing. West-failure appears, often, to be a necessary precondition of promoting the self-determination to which even imperial powers claim to ally (Ferguson 2004). At the heart of the Crisis of the Twenty-First Century are problems which are diverse in nature, which almost always cross borders and with which nation states seem ill-equipped to deal. The result is an early Twenty-First Century which is characterised, like the Third Century, by an increasingly diverse array of policies and procedures by powers and societies which seek to adapt to altering circumstances, but are unable because of their Westphalian legacies. The consequence for states which recently emerged, or are in the process of emerging, from imperial control is that the imagined global panacea, the nation-state, 'can lead to war, disease, and poverty' (Hawksley 2009, 1). This is illustrated all too clearly by the legacy of many states beyond the self-assured security of the West, which have experienced a transition from empire to nation-state defined not by peace and progress, but by 'poverty, ethnic and religious differences, corruption, land disputes... and venal leaders' (Hawksley 2009, 379). Empire has a bloody legacy of violent repression and vicious exploitation, but so has the nation-state, whose shortcomings are by no means exclusive to recently-formed or emergent countries. It may be that the very concept of the democratic nation-state is founded upon inherent inequality and violence (Ross 2004), and dissatisfaction at the nation-state is increasingly visible in the West, where the structure is becoming increasingly associated not with freedom, progress and prosperity but as a veil for economic inequalities masquerading as austerity, alongside 'social decay, incessant ideological posturing and symbolic antagonism, and government immobility'; a phenomenon reflected by disillusioned Western publics registering their dissatisfaction at self-interested and polarised political parties preoccupied with partisan polemics (Isaac 1998, 123), in the form of low election turnouts or flirting with extremist ideologues who preach poisonous definitions of the 'nation' rather than the state (Rosanvallon 2008). And as the illusions of the nation-state are increasingly revealed, it is unsurprising that scholars and politicians identify crisis and change in our time. Like the Romans, we find ourselves faced with a choice: cling stubbornly to our old imaginations, or adapt. The most important question is not whether modern empire will survive in light of emerging problems, but how existing political bodies, like those of the Romans, deal with change. We need to focus on what happens next.

Peter Heather (2007), Michael Grant (1999), Adrian Goldsworthy (2009), and Harold James (2006) argue that the Crisis of the Third Century did not precipitate the *end* of Rome's empire, but merely its transformation. Indeed, for James (2006), this is the inescapable paradox of empire, the 'Roman dilemma': the construction of an international order of laws, institutions of peace and networks of trade and commerce is self-defeating. For the more the imperials push towards unity and progress, the more the conquered push back. At least, argues Averil Cameron (1993), until the populace realise what awaits them

in the aftermath of empire's retreat, whereupon a hastily reconstituted, yet vastly different, imperial order is reinstated. The Crisis of the Twenty-First Century will not bring about the downfall of the West, but merely change.

However, change in response to crisis is not predictable. Post-colonialism urges the subaltern to speak, but sometimes what the subaltern has to say is unanticipated, disturbing, bordering on the heretical – actually endorsing the very imperial order of which the imperialists have grown weary (Orwell 1950; *Time* 2010). It is a familiar lesson of history. The Romans abandoned their provinces as their empire disintegrated from within, barely managing to send brief letters and military manuals (Winterbottom 1978) instructing their erstwhile brethren to fend for themselves. Twentieth Century Europeans, hurriedly dismantling the colonial realms bequeathed to them by malcompetent or malevolent Victorians, left a legacy of ill-prepared nation-states which rapidly descended into tyranny, civil war, and neocolonial pillage masquerading as development. And as a gradual stream of proclamations emerges from the White House and the European Parliament that *Imperium* is withdrawing and changing (BBC 2013), the inadequacies of both empire and the nation-state are increasingly suggested. This is to be one legacy of the Crisis of the Twenty-First Century – an echo of Emperor Honorius' exhortation that, rather than succumbing to imperial overlords, the world 'should stand alone, get used to arms, fight bravely, and defend with all their powers their land, property, wives, children, and, more important, their life and liberty' (Winterbottom 1978). Whether the hegemony of today will follow in Rome's footsteps, remains to be seen. As the papers collected in this special edition argue, we increasingly find ourselves in a time of transition which warrants substantive changes to the structure, policies and ambitions of the world.

In our first paper, Alexandros Koutsoukis (2013) re-appraises the continuing influence of Athenian philosophy on contemporary American foreign policy, to which Costas Koliopoulos (2013) responds. The spectre of Rome is critically reappraised by Adrian Campbell (2013), who, with a reply from Neville Morley (2013), investigates the continuation of the *translatio imperii* in the emerging post-American world. Amedeo Policante (2013) examines a phenomenon familiar to the Romans of the Crisis – the relationship between empire and piracy. A reply is offered by Eliga Gould (2013). Following this, Dominic Alessio (2013), with a reply from Simon Philpott (2013), investigates austerity's impact upon 'Monopoly Imperialism', highlighting the overlooked role of non-governmental organisations in establishing empire. With a reply from Neil Davidson (2013), our final paper, by Callum McCormick (2013), identifies a theme familiar to Gildas – cultural imperialisation and the ongoing influence of political hegemony upon the conquered.

Following the papers, a series of essays offer early glimpses into various aspects of the Crisis. In an echo of such Late Roman treatises as *De Rebus Bellicis* and *De Re Militari*, penned by besieged engineers scrambling to give their crumbling Empire a technological edge over its adversaries (Luttwak 1976), Michael Reynolds' 'Return of the Maxim Gun' (2013) identifies the continuing economic and strategic appeal to cash-strapped imperial powers of imposing and policing their order via cheaper, high-tech war machines. In 'The English School and the Concept of "Empire"', Yannis Stivachtis (2013) argues that in contrast to the traditional English School dichotomy between empire and a Hobbesian 'international society', the boundary between empire and a society of states is necessarily blurred and unclear, reflecting the contrast between the imperial mission of pre-Crisis Rome and the static Rome of the Fourth Century onwards. And, in another case reminiscent of the Romans' crisis, Bojan Savić's (2013) essay 'Relinquishing and Governing the Volatile' examines the impact of imperial austerity upon NATO operations in Afghanistan,

focusing on the discourses of securitisation and development which, like Gildas' *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae*, frame imperial withdrawal in terms which are perhaps unnecessarily grim.

Empire is much more than mere territory, but the geopolitics of Crisis cannot be ignored. The collected papers of Christopher Hewer (2013), Ronaldo Munck (2013), David Keeling (2013), and Klaus Dodds (2013), in our special symposium on the Falkland Islands dispute, demonstrate that the continuing connexion between security, resources, and prestige remains as significant to today's politicians as to any emperor on the Palatine Hill.

The uneasy relationship between empire and austerity is not confined to this edition. In the first of our two symposia, Noam Chomsky's *Making the Future: Occupations, Interventions, Empire and Resistance* (2012) is reviewed by Juliana Bidadanure (2013), Jason Dittmer (2013), Fred Dallmayr (2013), and Ben Coulson (2013), with a reply from Noam Chomsky (2013). The second symposium focuses on Leo Blanken's *Rational Empires: Institutional Incentives and Imperial Expansion* (2012), reviewed by Russell Foster (2013b), Frank Zagare (2013), and April Biccum (2013), with a reply from Leo Blanken (2013). Together, the articles, replies, reviews, and essays in this edition shed light upon academic reactions to an emerging crisis of empire and austerity.

Were St. Gildas, sitting in his draughty scriptorium in the Sixth Century, to seek out Merlin's magic and gain a glimpse of our present day, he might not particularly be surprised, as the Crisis of the Twenty-First Century is in essence nothing new – it is merely another period of transition.

Rome survived the Crisis of the Third Century, but what emerged was a greatly changed world. Where once Rome had feigned invitation and invincibility – at least if we believe the self-laudatory propaganda of rhetoricians and Emperors (MacMullen 1976) – its legions enforcing order while its savants brought civilisation to its subjugated yet successful inhabitants, the post-Crisis Rome was very different. While Romans under the Republic and the early Emperors had at least been able to pretend to themselves that their realm was Cicero's 'harbour and refuge of kings, tribes and nations seeking this one thing... the love of order and justice and the protection of our allies by equanimity and good faith' (Grant 1971), the Roman Empire which staggered out of the Crisis was a deeply fragmented, brazenly dogmatic, and fiercely intolerant totalitarian theocracy even *more* assured of its unique self-righteousness against all other societies, even as its weakened and corrupt government could not – or would not – halt the rot spreading throughout the dying *imperium's* political, military, economic, financial, social, and religious networks. This was the legacy of the Third Century. What the legacy of the Twenty-First Century will be is unknown. Harold James (2006) discerns a stronger, single global civilisation based not on rules, but on values, Andrew Bacevich (2008) perceives a revived yet changed *Imperium Americanum*, dogmatic and paranoid like post-Crisis Rome, while Robert Kaplan (2012) predicts a global disorder little different to the dark pages of Gildas. How our societies are adapting, and will continue to adapt, to current dynamics is unclear and fiercely contested, little different from the attempted adaptations of post-Crisis Rome. There is no universal answer, but one thing is certain – neither empire nor the nation-state, as we have conceived them, offer solutions. Like the Romano-British of Gildas' chronicle, we are caught in a grim dilemma. Empire pushes us back to the nation-state, the nation-state pushes us back to empire; between these two kinds of death we are either drowned or slaughtered. And we have no Emperor Honorius, no General Aëtius, to ask for a solution.

Like the Roman Empire which emerged bloodied and battered from the Crisis of the Third Century, the world following the Crisis of the Twenty-First Century – for better or for worse – will be markedly different. The transition has begun, and the papers collected in this issue shed early glimpses upon the changing nature of the world’s latest manifestation of *Imperium*.

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