



## [Augustine, City of God V.17.1](#)

That Rome's submission of nations and imposition of its own laws was done purely out of desire for victory.

**Name of the author:** Augustine

**Date:** 413 CE to 427 CE

**Place:** Hippo

**Language:** Latin

**Category:** Christian

**Literary genre:** Rhetorical treatise

**Title of work:** City of God

**Reference:** V.17.1

**Commentary:**

For an introduction to Augustine and the *City of God*, please see the commentary on [II.16](#).

The above passage is taken from the fifth book of the *City of God*. The principle theme of this book is the reason for the success and survival of the Roman empire, which Augustine turns to properly after a critique in the first eleven chapters of various incarnations of astrology and divinations, the argument being that nothing humanity experiences is due to fate. In V.11, Augustine's consideration of Rome's success begins. He draws significantly on Sallust for his discussion of Roman imperial achievements, such as Sallust's claims that the early Romans were desirous of praise and glory. This allowed the evolution of power and dominion, which was frequently won through war. In V.12, Sallust's triad of glory-honour-power (*gloria-honor-imperium*) is cited as summing up Rome's ambitions (see Sallust, *Conspiracy of Catiline* XI.2; Peter Brown argues that Sallust's history of the decline of the Roman Republic was "the authoritative history of the period," which Augustine turned into a religious history by arguing in the *City of God* that Rome, ignorant of Christ, became wrapped up in purely human concerns. See *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 310. See also *City of God* II.19, where Augustine quotes Sallust, *Histories* I.16; also, Peter Iver Kaufman, "Augustine's Dystopia," p. 71-72, on Augustine's use of Sallust to weigh Roman success against its ultimate judgement by God). From chapter thirteen onwards, Augustine's focus turns to eschatology and the notion of the "two cities," of heaven and of earth, with Roman virtue compared unfavourably with that of Christianity due to the desire for glory and fame getting in the way of love for God, which citizenship of the heavenly city depends on (see also the discussion of this theme in Augustine's [Letter 138.17](#)). [Chapter sixteen](#), which immediately precedes our passage here, argues that the Roman empire is useful for citizens of the eternal city because while they are living as pilgrims, temporary residents on earth, they can observe the level of devotion that Rome's citizens have towards her expansion and prosperity, and take inspiration for their own excellence. Chapter eighteen further develops this theme by referencing well known Roman heroes as *exempla* (for an overview of the chapters of book five outlined here, see Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's City of God*, p. 97-98). It is in chapter seventeen, the focus of our discussion here, that we see one of the few occasions in the book where political theory comes into play. One of the principles stated in our passage is that if the same results will be obtained through diplomatic channels (i.e. agreements between parties) that would be obtained through war, then the non-violent course of action should be taken (see also *City of God* IV.15, where this theme of peace being preferable to the extension of empire is also considered). Moreover, if in order for glory to be gained one party will emerge as victors and the other defeated, then the glory itself is diminished (see O'Daly, *Augustine's City of God*, p. 98).

The present passage begins by asking whether apart from the great slaughter which occurred in the wars that she waged against other peoples (*gentes*), Rome did any harm to them in the attempt to impose her laws. This follows on from the opening of the chapter (not quoted above), where Augustine asks rhetorically whether it really matters under whose government a person lives, given that human life is relatively short anyway. As long as ruling powers do not force a person into immoral action, he suggests, it is somewhat irrelevant which power they are. This line of argument then continues in our passage, where the biggest problem with Roman rule is the fact that it asserted its dominion through violence. The implication, then, is that were it not for this, those subdued under Rome would be no worse or better off than if they had been under the government of another power. As Paul Griffiths notes, this viewpoint essentially lumps all "laws and norms" of any given society, be it pagan, Christian, or mixed, into one



category (see “Secularity and *Saeculum*,” p. 53). When it comes to Roman law, then, it is no better or worse in principle than any other system (Augustine does not go into the specifics here of instances where Roman law and Christianity have in the past come into conflict – this is not the purpose of his argument). The problem is not with the law itself, but with the way it has been imposed. As Oliver O’Donovan states, the Romans did not wrong other nations just by ruling them; the fact that they governed themselves by the same laws that they imposed upon those they conquered proves this. If they had imposed their laws without resorting to war, therefore, they would be entirely equal to other nations (O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgement*, p. 212). Moreover, Augustine states that the task of introducing Roman law to others would have been more successfully accomplished if it had been done diplomatically, by the agreement (*concorditer*) of those who were to receive it. However, this would not have brought any glory of conquest to the Romans, something which as explained above, Augustine makes very clear was a top priority for them, and something which distinguished them from those who belonged to the heavenly city. This is what the references to Mars and Bellona mean (the god and goddess of war), with Victoria, the goddess of victory symbolising that without fighting, no party can emerge triumphant.

The next statement Augustine makes is of particular interest, as he argues that if the near universal Roman citizenship granted by the edict of Caracalla (or the Antonine Constitution) in 212 CE had been implemented earlier, then the similarity between Rome and other peoples would have been achieved sooner. Augustine’s ancestors themselves are thought to have been among the provincials who gained Roman citizenship through Caracalla’s edict; this is suggested by their family name, Aurelius. Augustine’s argument is that if universal Roman citizenship, rather than violent submission, had been Rome’s approach from the beginning, it would actually have been better in terms of the administration of the commonwealth (*res publica*). Augustine condemns Roman *imperialism*, but not the Roman empire itself (see Inglebert, “Christian Reflections on Roman Citizenship”). Even though the poorer citizens would be living at the expense of the richer, this would be more readily tolerated were they to agree to it, rather than it being extorted from them as conquered peoples. The crux of the argument, then, is that peaceful channels are always preferable. The opposition between the way in which the Romans subdued other peoples and imposed their law, and the way in which universal citizenship was implemented is made clear in the language used to describe the two events. The violence of war is emphasised with suitably brutal language of slaughter (*strages*), while the granting of citizenship is described as humane (*humanus*) and agreeable/acceptable (*gratus*).

In summary, there are two particularly significant points of note which we can isolate from this passage. Firstly, that Roman law goes hand in hand with violence, because those whom it was imposed upon had little choice but accept it. Secondly, Rome was marked out from other peoples by its desire to conquer others, as its law was followed in the same way by Rome’s own people and those whom it was imposed upon. The unifying effect of Roman law is therefore emphasised here by Augustine, but not in a positive way. It was only with the granting of Roman near universal citizenship in 212 CE that any sort of equality was reached between the Roman people and those which had been incorporated into the empire.

Keywords in the original language:

- [administrator](#)
- [Bellona](#)
- [bellum](#)
- [civis Romanus](#)
- [civitas](#)
- [concorditer](#)
- [concors](#)
- [extorqueo](#)
- [gens](#)
- [gloria](#)
- [imperium Romanum](#)
- [lex](#)
- [Mars](#)
- [noceo](#)
- [publicus](#)
- [pugno](#)



- [res publica](#)
- [Romanus](#)
- [societas](#)
- [strages](#)
- [subiugo](#)
- [triumpho](#)
- [victoria](#)
- [vinco](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Antonine Constitution](#)
- [Bellona](#)
- [Mars](#)
- [Roman citizenship](#)
- [Roman conquests](#)
- [Roman domination](#)
- [Roman expansion](#)
- [Roman law](#)
- [Roman victory](#)
- [war](#)

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