ULTIMUS ROMANORUM:

NAPOLEON I AND HIS LATIN IMPERIAL INHERITANCE

by

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Dedicated most respectfully

to the memory of

THE KING OF ROME

(1811-1832)

in the bicentennial year of his birth.
Napoleon I and his empire are frequently seen to have been the products of the French Revolution, and indeed they represented in many ways the culmination of the revolutionary impetus initially unleashed by Enlightenment thought and social experimentation. However, while this may partially be true, these elements only served to present the circumstances necessary for the realization of the Emperor’s broader ambitions, which were fired not by only by the fundamental principles of the Revolution, but also by his desire to stabilize, restructure and reinvent French, and eventually Western European, society.

An important question remains, however: From whence did Napoleon draw his large-scale imperial ambitions? Although scholars of decidedly anti-Bonapartist leanings frequently hurl charges of megalomania and folie de grandeur, a closer examination of the roots of the Emperor’s dreams for a pan-European imperial confederation show that the origins of this idea can be found in the Latin tradition of empire, and in the centrality and persistence of this concept in the centuries that followed the progressive dissolution of the Roman Empire at the beginning of the 5th century CE, which culminated in the dethronement of the young Romulus Augustus in 476 CE.

This notion of imperial centrality and pervasive control, which had endured in the communal consciousness of Western Europe from the time of Augustus (r.27 BCE-14 CE) to the fall of the Roman Empire under Romulus, was repeatedly to fire the hearts and minds of a succession of leaders of very different backgrounds and personal tendencies, from Constantine the Great (r.306-337 CE) to Justinian (r. 527-565) and Charlemagne (r.800-814 CE). The young Napoleon Bonaparte, through his reading of
the classical works of Western history and jurisprudence, was thus to encounter notions and concepts of empire that were later to find an echo in his dramatic reinvention of early-19th century European society.

It is my aim in this short article to highlight some of the institutions and policies of the Emperor of the French that were derived from, or at the very least inspired by, the longstanding examples of his august imperial predecessors. Indeed, upon even a cursory examination of the various initiatives and undertakings of the French First Empire, it becomes clear that this Roman tradition of *imperium*, of imperial agency, so deeply embedded in the consciousness of Western Europe long after the collapse of the Empire itself, deeply influenced the direction of French policy, procedure and polity in the opening years of the 19th century.

After the long theocratic shadow of the Middle Ages had begun to lift from the Continent, ideas and inspiration drawn from the traditions of the ancient Greco-Roman civilizations served as a fundamental point of inspiration for European art, culture and
society, from the early days of the Italian Renaissance of the late 14th century through the early decades of the 19th century. It is equally clear that the rediscovery of the Greco-Roman ethos of scientific experimentation and innovation, which had long lain dormant beneath the autocratic and unbending heel of medieval theocracy, rapidly led to the flowering of a new breed of scientists and social thinkers during the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries. The ideas espoused by such luminaries as Voltaire (1694-1778) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) helped shape the psycho-emotional landscape of many a would-be revolutionary, among them a certain Corsican junior officer named Napoleone Buonaparte, who found himself particularly drawn to the works of the great social thinker of Geneva.

With the rediscovery of Roman traditions of thought and practical exploration came a desire to redesign European civilization along more democratic and merit-centered lines, all in an effort to relive what were then perceived to be the “glory days” of the high Latin culture of Cicero, of Livy and of Virgil. During the French Revolution and its aftermath, structures and nomenclature drawn from the pages of the classical Roman thinkers and historians of the Republican era abounded, and for a time it was deemed fashionable, as in the case of Gracchus Babeuf and other prominent revolutionaries, to adopt Latin personal names as revolutionary *noms de guerre*.

It was thus in this atmosphere of heightened revolutionary sentimentality and nostalgia for things Roman that the young General Bonaparte rose to supreme power in the aftermath of the coup of 18 Brumaire. What he was to accomplish in the months and years to follow was simply astounding, and in many ways the bloodless coup of
November 18, 1799 that established him as the central authority of the French state can be seen as a puissant and far less costly echo of the rise of Octavian Caesar to the role of princeps, or first man of the Roman state, in the aftermath of the battle of Philippi in 42 BCE, and of the defeat of his rivals Antony and Cleopatra in the subsequent naval contest at Actium in 30 BCE.

In the same way that Octavian, who was eventually granted the honorific of “Augustus” by the Roman Senate, was to first stabilize and then to restructure Roman political and social institutions after decades of internecine warfare and social unrest, so too was the young Corsican general to bring an atmosphere of solidity and safety to a France that had been torn apart by a decade of revolutionary brutality, upheaval and uncertainty.

What followed next was to prove equally intriguing, for Bonaparte was to follow closely the example of the first of the Roman emperors in declaring his adherence to republican
principles, all the while engineering his own ascension to the imperial dignity, at first in fact, if not in name. Throughout the entirety of his reign, Augustus was to pay lip service to the notion of the Roman Republic, and to the primacy of the Senate as chief institution of the state, while at the same time he methodically engineered the establishment of imperial institutions and practices throughout the length and breadth of the Roman dominions.

Taking a powerful cue from the first of the emperors in the Western tradition, Napoleon methodically planned his ascent to the throne, while at the same time he was careful not to offend the lingering revolutionary sentiments of the French people. His first step in the establishment of an imperial hierarchy was the creation of the Legion of Honor, which was instituted by a decree of May 19, 1802, and which scrupulously avoided nomenclature and structures associated with the still-despised feudal regime of pre-revolutionary Bourbon France. Members of this new order of merit were to be called legionnaires, not knights, and were to be organized into cohorts, not chapters or commanderies, thus avoiding any suspicion of monarchical or nobiliary tendencies. Indeed, the awards were to be for the lifetime of the recipient only, and there was at first no indication that these honors might eventually become hereditary, as they did, under certain conditions, at the height of the Empire.
Historians of Western civilization have sometimes viewed Napoleon's personal trajectory as unique, but in many ways, he drew on the same sorts of discontents and disturbances as did his Roman predecessors Augustus and Constantine in his efforts to shape and direct public policy and government restructuring. Like Augustus, he maneuvered his way to supreme power on the complaints of those elements of society which had the most to gain from a newly-stabilized central authority, namely the prosperous middle class. Tired of upheaval and uncertainty, this elements of both Roman and French society embraced Augustus and Napoleon, the respective proponents of order and safety for all.
Robin W. Winks, in his *Western Civilization: A Brief History*, writes that “under Napoleon’s reign, the bones of the Revolution—uniform law codes, reorganized public finance, the stabilization of the official orders of government and society, and the protection of property and power—took on their permanent flesh.” Furthermore, Winks continues, “Out of the myriad complaints, plans, alternatives, and secondary and tertiary revolutions of the period 1778-1804, the government of Napoleon strengthened and established those that appealed most strongly to the groups that supported him and those whose complaints had launched the Revolution—the middle classes with their stability, wealth, and demands for opportunities open to talent, energy, and work.” Thus it was that the foundation of the new monarchy was not to be a hereditary class of noble descent and inherited privilege, but those who had possessed the drive and acumen to rise in society on their own merits and, like the Emperor himself, by means of their own personal efforts.
With the so-called “plebiscite” of May 18, 1804, First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte was to become “Napoléon Ier, Empereur des Français,” and was quickly to create his own meritocratic titles of nobility and honor, although these were not to be fully developed until the decree of March 1, 1808, which established the “nobility of the Empire” as a key element of the upper echelons of French government and society. For his part, although Augustus did not establish a new nobility within the structures of Roman society, he did reorganize and codify the various levels, perquisites and privileges of the existing aristocracy of his time.

The facade of republicanism was perpetuated well into the early days of the Empire, with Napoleon swearing to

“...maintain the territory of the Republic in its integrity; to respect and enforce the laws of the Concordat and the Freedom of Worship; to respect and enforce Equality before the Law, political and civil liberty, and the irreversibility of the sale of national property; to lay on no duty, to impose no tax, except according to law; to maintain the institution of the Legion of Honor; and to govern only in accordance with the interests, the happiness and the glory of the French people.”

Like Augustus, Napoleon played the role of primus inter pares as long as was absolutely necessary, and like Augustus, all the while he positioned himself to exercise supreme and unchallenged power in the state.
Well before his ascension to the imperial purple, Napoleon had engineered a rapprochement between the French state and the Roman Catholic Church, known today as the Concordat of 1801. In this document, which recognized the primacy of the Catholic religion in France, First Consul Bonaparte had built a bridge between the French state, once atheistic and openly hostile to the Papacy in particular, and the followers of this important faith, which had been the most pervasive and dominant influence in European life since the age of the Roman emperor Constantine the Great. Like Constantine, however, Bonaparte most decidedly wanted things his own way, and was the one of the key architects of the document itself, as was Constantine of the Nicene Creed of 325 CE, each man essentially a pragmatist in the midst of a veritable sea of ideologues.

Much of the good will that might have existed between the new French Empire and the Papacy was dispelled, however, by Napoleon's subsequent manipulation of Pius VII, which some historians see as a misstep. Writing of the Emperor's coronation in Paris on December 4, 1804, Arnold Toynbee, in his landmark work, *A Study of History*, had this to say of Napoleon's actions with regard to his papal guest/prisoner:

“Napoleon's mistake was to summon the pope from Rome to Paris to assist at his coronation as Emperor of a reconstituted substitute for the Holy Roman Empire; and, by flouting Rome and bullying her sovereign pontiff, he won, not respect for his own political power, but sympathy for the helplessness of his venerable victim.”
It was, however, in the realm of jurisprudence and the organization of civil society that Napoleon revealed himself to be most indebted to a Roman predecessor, but this time to an Eastern emperor, Justinian I. During his youth at the military academy of Brienne, the cadet Bonaparte became deeply acquainted with the famous *Institutes of Justinian*, which laid out the Byzantine ruler’s road map for a widespread reorganization of the state, as well as of civil society, in the mid-6th century CE. This voluminous document, which swept away the accumulated clutter of literally centuries of outdated Roman jurisprudence and social legislation, was to serve as a fundamental inspiration for the Code Civil, now widely known as the Code Napoleon, promulgated in 1802 by the soon-to-be French imperial hierarch.

American historian Bob Carroll writes thus of Napoleon's most notable achievement in the realm of civil organization:

“The greatest of the domestic reforms by far was the Code Napoleon, a new civil code for France. Prior to this, laws in France were a crazy quilt. In the south, Roman law dating
back more than 1,500 years was the base. In the north, customary, or common, law
applied, some left over from as long ago as ancient Gaul.”

According to Carroll, this, however, constituted simply the tip of the historico-legal
iceberg that was shattered by the Napoleon's forceful rewriting of French civil law, for
“there were 366 separate local law codes scattered around the country. A particular act
might be legal in one place and illegal elsewhere, with punishments ranging from a light
fine in one municipality to a long prison term in another.” Finally, there were the over
14,000 relatively new laws dealing with civil society, enacted during the period of the
Revolution and its aftermath, that required harmonization and codification into a
consistent and universally effective body of legislation.

This landmark social and political document, which has withstood the test of over two
centuries of change and trauma in French and European history, is largely unaltered
from its original version. As he was in the case of the Concordat of 1801, Napoleon was a
key player in the creation and wording of this seminal document, as important in its way
as the monumental Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1791, and infinitely broader in its
practical scope and dimensions. Indeed, Napoleon himself was to say of this
achievement that, “My glory is not to have won forty battles, for Waterloo's defeat will
destroy the memory of as many victories. But what nothing will destroy, what will live
eternally, is my Civil Code.”

It is this insistence on the primacy of civil institutions that sets the Emperor apart from
those who have merely earned a name as successful military leaders, for he recognized
with astounding clarity the fundamental importance of the stability of social and
political structures in the successful propagation of a nation’s policies and values. Indeed, as early as 1802, while enmeshed in the debate over the creation of the Legion of Honor, First Consul Bonaparte found it necessary to defend his concept of a decoration that would highlight the various contributions to the public good that were every day improving conditions in post-revolutionary France.

Bonaparte made known his will in the meetings of the various assemblies, stating forcefully to his councilors that it was necessary to "create an order which will be the sign of virtue, of honor, of heroism, a distinction which serves to reward both military bravery and civil merit." Faced with those in the Council of State who would limit membership in the new order to military personnel, he responded sharply, and with incontrovertible logic:

*What constitutes the power of a general? His civil abilities: the sharpness of his eye, his power of calculation, his mind, his administrative knowledge and eloquence, not that of the jurist, but that which is fitting for the leadership of armies, and finally his knowledge of men: all this is civil.*

When the measure made its way through the various channels of government and finally came to a vote in the Legislature, it was adopted by a margin of 166 in favor to 110 against, out of a total of 276 voices.

It is precisely this sort of thinking, these pragmatic insights into the inner workings of a successful society, that constitute an important element of the greatness of this man, as
innovative a political and social thinker as he was a military strategist. Although essentially raised in the heart of a culture of warfare, both at Brienne and at the Royal Military School in Paris, Napoleon had the breadth of vision and the intuitive knowledge of a born statesman, both of which were to serve him and his people remarkably well in the difficult early days of the Empire.

Just as the era of Augustus was to bring about a thorough rejection of the decades of bitter internecine conflict that had preceded it, so too was the era of Napoleon to represent a distinct departure from the liberalism that had first grown up in the late Enlightenment period. In his landmark study, Western Civilizations, Edward McNall Burns writes that “[t]he period of Napoleon's rule... may properly be regarded as the initial stage of the nineteenth-century reaction against the liberal ideas which had made the Revolution possible.” Burns is brutally direct in his assessment of the Napoleonic regime's long-term goals and aspirations, stating forcefully that “[Napoleon's] real aim, so far as it concerned the work of the Revolution, was to preserve those achievements which comported with national greatness and with his own ambitions for military glory... But liberty in the sense of the inviolability of personal rights meant nothing to him.” Here, too, we see the shadow of Latin notion of imperium, in which martial success and the greater glory of Rome, both in their concrete forms, and as abstract concepts, are of paramount importance and centrality in the realm of governance.
Deep though the debt of the First Empire may have been to the imperial ethos of ancient Rome, it also drew directly on specific elements of the common history of the French nation, most notably on aspects of the great Carolingian epoch of the 9th century. Napoleon himself was to say of his accession to the purple, “I did not succeed Louis XVI; I succeeded Charlemagne,” thereby creating an indisputable link between himself and the notion of a pan-European secular Western Empire, much as his Frankish predecessor had underscored his own lineal connection to the grandeur and pervasive primacy of the Roman imperial state as it had existed in the heyday of the post-Constantinian adoption of Christianity.

Napoleon drew deeply on the era of Charlemagne’s heyday, both for political and for decorative motifs, even adopting what he believed to have been a Carolingian symbol, the honey bee, as one of his personal symbols. It was, however, not only in the realm of the decorative arts that the great Carolus was referenced, however, for the newly “elected” Emperor of the French was to powerfully echo Charlemagne’s coronation as Holy Roman Emperor at St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, on December 25, 800 CE, by
summoning Pope Pius VII to bless his own coronation with the so-called “Crown of Charlemagne” on December 2, 1804, in the Cathedral of Nôtre-Dame of Paris. However, whereas Charlemagne had somewhat reluctantly submitted to the coronation rite at the hands of Pope Leo III, Napoleon was to crown himself, as well as his imperial consort, the Empress Josephine, in full view of the assembled dignitaries of the Empire, thereby demonstrating for all to see his own unshakable belief in his personal destiny and imperial agency.

The Napoleonic “Crown of Charlemagne,” created in 1804

The Emperor’s imitation of the example of Charlemagne was not limited to the decorative or the symbolic, however, for in another important realm, that of education, Napoleon’s career was to echo that of his great Frankish predecessor. Charlemagne, although widely believed to have been illiterate himself, had a fundamental appreciation for the importance of education in the life of a successful society, and was to institute key changes in the educational institutions of his domains. His august example, so rare in an age of limited literacy and widespread intellectual poverty, was to be powerfully echoed by the innovations and restructuring in French education that were to take place under Napoleon exactly one millennium later.
Charlemagne had commanded in the *Admonitio Generalis* (Chapter 72) of 789 CE, “... [L]et schools be established so that boys may learn to read,” further enjoining religious authorities to “[c]orrect carefully the Psalms, the signs in writing, the songs, the calendar, the grammar, in each monastery or bishopric,” for his part, Napoleon set about reorganizing and secularizing education throughout France and its expanding Empire.

Napoleonic scholar J. David Markham writes with keen insight of the re-emergence of education as a centralized entity in Carolingian Europe:

“It was not until the reign of Charlemagne, made King of the Franks in 768 A. D. and crowned Holy Roman Emperor on Christmas day of 800 A. D., that there was a revival of formal learning on the continent of Europe. After meeting with the Saxon teacher Alcuin at Parma, Charlemagne established the palace school, with Alcuin at its head. His famous capitulary of 787 established the idea of a more widespread educational effort,
and he imported educators from throughout the rest of the world.” Indeed, avers Markham,

“Education under Charlemagne spread throughout his realm, and three important characteristics can be drawn from this period. First, the system of education being developed was very centralized. In this case it began with the palace school, and spread to some monasteries throughout the kingdom. Second, while Charlemagne had a genuine intellectual interest in education, most of the education provided was religious in nature. Third, the education was provided to a very tiny elite.” In sum, he concludes, “These three characteristics would continue to dominate education in France for centuries, and the centralization and elitist aspects can be seem, to one extent or another, up to the present day” (this author's highlighting and italics). In this way, as in so many others, the course of French history can be seen to be a cumulative and progressive exercise in the development and perfecting of systems and structures, with innovation itself relegated to a somewhat secondary role.

“Education was high on Napoleon's list of priorities,” continues Markham, “which were in large part those of the middle class. Napoleon believed in a system of merit, and for such a system to be effective there must be some form of widespread education, especially at the secondary level. Besides, the state of French education was not all that it could have been when Napoleon began to rule. This fact was made abundantly clear by the results of a survey of all prefects in the nation conducted in March of 1801, under the direction of Minister for Home Affairs Chaptal. Numerous complaints were heard
regarding the lack of schools in many areas, lack of professionalism among teachers, lack of discipline and attendance by the students and, in a few areas, the lack of religious education.” Once again, this time in the realm of education, Napoleon was to directly address the needs and concerns of an increasingly influential middle class.

Such is the belief of Markham, who states unequivocally, “It is clear that the new system of education introduced by Napoleon had more than one purpose. It was intended, of course, to provide an educated elite that could help run the country and the military. It was also designed to provide for an increased middle class; a middle class that would be successful and hence non-revolutionary.” This, then, represents another of the keys to Napoleon’s thought, imperial in its scope and implications, yet fundamentally pragmatic in its orientation: if people are successful within the parameters of any given society, and are thus content with their lot in life, they will most likely not rebel against the central state authority, but will instead ensure its perpetuation through active and fruitful participation in that society and its system of government.

In an equally practical fashion, the Emperor sought to tie together his growing Empire, as well as to expand and empower his military machine through the construction of an extensive series of roads and bridges, some of which were first thrown together in the run-up to key battles, others of which were the carefully-planned fruit of efforts undertaken by Imperial Ministry of Bridges and Thoroughfares. In his book *The Napoleonic Revolution*, Robert B. Holtman writes that “[t]he most important long-range contribution the Napoleonic age made to commerce was the improvement of transportation.” The long-term results of the Emperor's short-term constructions may
have been incidental and unpremeditated, but they were also of pivotal importance to industry and trade, particularly as 19th century Europe moved definitively to expand the reach of the Industrial Revolution. Indeed, writes Holtman, “At the end of [Napoleon’s] reign there were 33,000 kilometers of royal roads... Napoleon also built bridges, including four over the Seine at Paris and one over the Rhine at Kiel.” In this domain, too, the Emperor was to emulate the example of the Roman rulers, who recognized the importance of these elements of the imperial infrastructure to the maintenance of peace, trade and long-distance communication. Indeed, the survival of their ancient thoroughfares into the modern world attests to the importance the Roman rulers attached to this aspect of the imperial infrastructure, both to the smooth flow of communications throughout the Empire, and to the maintenance of trade and military routes throughout Europe, the Middle East and North Africa.

Perhaps the last word on his myriad achievements should belong to the Emperor himself, however, who wrote, through his faithful amanuensis, the Count of Las Cases, from the prison-house of Longwood,

“I closed the gulf of anarchy and brought order out of chaos. I rewarded merit regardless of birth or wealth, wherever I found it. I abolished feudalism and restored equality to all regardless of religion and before the law. I fought the decrepit monarchies of the Old Regime because the alternative was the destruction of all this. I purified the Revolution.”

In this self-assessment, too, we are reminded of Augustus’ oft-quoted words about his own reign, “I found a Rome built of brick, and left it a Rome built of marble.” However,
while the long-broken and widely-scattered ruins of imperial Rome now attest to the supreme mutability of the material realm, on the contrary, the values, notions and institutions established under Napoleon demonstrate most powerfully the immense durability of the edifice that he constructed in the hearts, minds and spirit of the people of France. According to many scholars, such as the great French historian Albert Sorel, Napoleon was ultimately a tragic hero, his exile on Saint Helena embittered by the knowledge that at every step he had been, not the master of fate, but rather its victim: “I have conceived many plans, but I was never free to execute one of them.” Indeed, continues Sorel, the Emperor claimed that “for all that I held the rudder, and with a strong hand, the waves were a good deal stronger. I was never in truth my own master; I was always governed by circumstances.”

His Shadow Amazes Them: A posthumous tribute to Napoleon I, “Last of the Romans,” ca. 1840

Nevertheless, today we may justifiably and powerfully assert that Napoleon I, despite the vagaries of fate and the vicissitudes of his imperial career, well deserves the time-honored epithet that eluded him during his lifetime, and which modern prejudice and
anti-Bonapartist animus have too long denied him since his lonely and painful death on Saint Helena: that of **ULTIMUS ROMANORUM: Last of the Romans.**

With the demise of the Emperor on that remote and forbidding rock was lost the last genuine representative of the centuries-old Roman imperial tradition of a unified Western Europe. This monumental loss, which was to have as its ultimate and heartbreaking manifestation the widespread suffering engendered by the First and Second World Wars, has haunted the modern world ever since. Sadly, of the splendid and revivified Latin empire that was the brilliant, but fleeting product of the Emperor's personal drive and epochal ambition, there now remains but a glittering, tantalizing shadow, a meaningless specter whose former glory has been extinguished and subsumed beneath the vague, overly elastic and timid appellation of **European Union.**

Perhaps the last word on the Emperor, however, should belong to one of the great Napoleonic scholars of the early 20th century, Tancrède Martel, who wrote with profound insight of his achievements, and of his role in the modern world,

*One discovers in [Napoleon] the most complete personification of the Latin genius... He is still the “man of Destiny,” a sort of Messiah, the very incarnation of Order, the Emperor of the South, of the Latin World, the banner carrier of the Greco-Roman ideal, opposed to the somber and selfish aspirations of the Germanic and Anglo-Saxon race... [He is] the most colossal statue ever erected by Military Democracy and the People.*

Thus shall the Emperor remain, until the works of human hands are no more.
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