

Chapter 1

The Challenge of Roman History

1. WHY ROME?

Rome's original territory—the city itself and its entire agricultural hinterland—was 329 square miles in extent. That made early Rome smaller than the urbanized area of present-day Los Angeles (502 square miles), London (607 square miles), or Tokyo (845 square miles). The territory of Rome's ethnic neighbors—and sometime allies—the Latins, was a paltry 608 square miles. Despite its miniscule resources, Rome eventually went on to dominate all of Italy's 116,348 square miles and then all of the Mediterranean, together with significant parts of the Middle East and Atlantic Europe. At its height the Roman Empire extended over 1,000,000 square miles from Scotland to Sudan and from Morocco to Ukraine. Today Rome has a linguistic legacy of over 800 million people on two continents who speak a Latin-based Romance language. Although English is classified as a Germanic language, in any standard English dictionary about 60 percent of the words are Latin-based; in the sciences and technology the figure is much higher.

How Rome came to leave such a large imprint on history is one of the perennial questions asked by historians. The Romans themselves had a ready answer: Their success was due, they said, to Providence, (*fortuna*) and their hard work (*industria*) and manly character (*virtus*). Religious observance, too, was all-important. According to Cicero, Rome “could never have become so great unless we Romans had taken such care to placate the immortal gods” (*On the nature of the gods* 3.6).

Some Answers

Modern historians, however, look for more prosaic, secular answers. Roman aggressiveness has often been proposed as a basic explanation. According to this theory, Romans were able to beat their neighbors into subjection through sheer

force of arms. Yet, although Romans had military talent in abundance, they lived in a hostile Mediterranean-European world where they had no shortage of militant peer-competitors and, in the short term, some of them proved even more effective than the Romans at waging war. In 390 b.c., a Celtic war band defeated the Roman army and then went on to sack the city of Rome itself. Fear of the Celts, *metus Gallicus*, remained a constant throughout much of Rome's history. Some 70 years after Rome's sack by the Celts, the mountain-dwelling Samnites, its most persistent enemies in Italy, forced the whole Roman army with both of its consular commanders to surrender at the battle of the Caudine Forks, just 60 miles from Rome. Both defeats remained as nagging, humiliating memories. Just 56 years after the battle of Caudine Forks, Romans found themselves in a life-and-death struggle with Carthage, Rome's rival in north Africa. In 105 b.c., a century after the defeat of Carthage—and long after Rome had acquired much of its overseas empire—Roman legions suffered a staggering defeat at the hands of migrating Celts and Germans at the battle of Arausio in southern France, losing 80,000 men in a single day. In all, it is estimated that Rome suffered 90 severe defeats on the battlefield in the five-hundred-year period of the Republic—precisely the period when Rome was building its empire. Thus, whatever the explanation for Rome's rise to power, it can hardly be explained by military prowess alone. Nor can it be explained because Rome lived with non-military, peaceful neighbors.

No empire survives for very long—let alone the thousand or so years Roman rule flourished—on coercion, violence, or military power alone. What led to Rome's success in empire-building was a complex interaction of geographic, social, cultural, political, and economic factors. In what follows, each one of these factors will be analyzed individually to provide a comprehensive explanation of Rome's rise to power, beginning with what Rome inherited as part of its Mediterranean heritage. Ultimately, however, the explanation will give emphasis to Rome's superior political culture—its grasp of the political nature of human society. It was through politics that Rome triumphed.

2. WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT ROME AND HOW DO WE KNOW IT?

Sources

It has been said that the study of antiquity is like trying to reconstruct the contents of the rooms of the Palace of Versailles by looking through keyholes. Some rooms are in complete darkness, and nothing at all is visible. Others are full of light, but only a few of the objects in the room can be made out. Yet others are poorly illuminated so that we can only guess at the room's contents. Whole floors are completely unavailable for examination, even if only through keyholes. In the surviving record of historical writings, the elite of Rome are over-represented while ordinary people hardly appear at all, or at best as stereotypes of hardy peasants, decadent city dwellers, and riotous mobs. Even among the elites, only a small percentage—the censors, consuls, and emperors—could be considered well-known. Although the Republic was founded in the late sixth century b.c. (traditionally in

509 B.C.) the first true personality that we know about was Appius Claudius Caecus (the “Blind”), censor in 312 B.C. The representation of women’s viewpoints—by women—is virtually non-existent. Elite women feature prominently in the Roman historical narrative, but almost all the narratives were written by men, so that when these women “speak” in the sources, their speeches are the compositions of male authors. Except in the case of inscriptions and a few fragmentary poems, no woman’s voice is heard unmediated and direct. Even when women speak to us from inscriptions, their messages are for the most part formulaic, that is, they repeat standard phrases that were used by males and females alike, often chosen from sample books provided to them by the producers of the inscriptions.

The written sources, which constitute the bulk of the evidence for Roman history, have their own built-in biases. Inscriptions, as noted in the previous paragraph, tend to be formulaic and repetitive. As for literature, it is estimated that only about five percent of *all* the compositions of ancient writers actually survives. Of the much-admired masterpiece, the *Zmyrna*, on which C. Helvidius Cinna (murdered by the mob which mistakenly identified him as one of Julius Caesar’s assassins) lavished nine years, only three lines survive. Why this particular five percent survived was not purely—or only—a matter of accident, but the product of a complicated process of selection. Some choices were made in antiquity. Many works perished because of their specialized nature or because they were deemed publishing failures. An ancient critic by the name of Dionysius of Halicarnassus said that the historian Polybius (much of whose history has perished) was “an author whom no one could bear to read to the end” (*de comparatione verborum*, 4). Ancient historians were as much literary stylists as historians in the scholarly sense of the term, and when their style was judged inferior, little point was seen in preserving them. Still other choices were made by medieval intermediaries who were ultimately responsible for passing on this potpourri of antiquity to later generations. The lack of printing was obviously a huge obstacle to the dissemination of information. Books, as opposed to pages glued together to form bulky rolls, did not appear until around the first century A.D.

The evidence for Roman (and Greek) history ranges, as a consequence, from the highly polished literary works of some historians, some poets, some playwrights, and so on, to scraps of papyrus containing lists of purchases and sales, and the crude and misspelled graffiti found on lavatory walls and elsewhere. On occasion we know more about days or weeks of some periods than we do about years or whole centuries of other periods.

BUT ARE THEY REAL SOURCES? Then again, ancient sources are not sources in the modern sense. Ancient history is, first and foremost, literature which aimed to entertain and instruct. Historians did not use archives. The kinds of sources social historians use for later periods of history such as wills, marriage contracts, title deeds, letters, commercial contracts, property registries and the like, have mostly vanished. There is no equivalent for ancient historians to the archives of court houses, businesses, churches, presidential libraries or the Library of Congress. Although military affairs predominate in Roman and Greek historical narratives, there are no minutes of the meetings of generals and their staffs. The closest we

come to these kinds of sources are the debates Caesar reports as having taken place in his war councils during the invasion of Gaul, but these reports were written for propaganda purposes at Rome and are not the minutes of the actual meetings. Modern historians would gladly exchange a few chapters or even whole books by some ancient historian for the unadorned notes of administrators or supply officers or the memories of enlisted men. But even here there are problems. Indeed, if we had the minutes or verbatim reports of what happened in ancient war meetings, we might misinterpret them. Take, for example, what a modern historian has to say about the super-abundant records we have from the Second World War. Sometimes, he says, the minutes of War Cabinet meeting were deliberately made ambiguous:

Often [the minutes] *were the very opposite of what had actually happened in meetings* that were prolix, open ended, highly personal and indecisive. Official Cabinet minutes are therefore opaque documents, *usually deliberately so* (emphasis added).

But even taking into account efforts to make minutes of meetings inscrutable verbatim records could also be misunderstood:

Of course, verbatim records, however well reported, can tell us next to nothing about all important aspects of exchanges besides the mere choice of words. Swiftiness of reply, absence of normal courtesies, tempo of speech, tone of voice, body-language, sheer decibel level, veins standing out on foreheads, clenching of fists, snapping of pencils and everything else that went to make up the expression of arguments over war time strategy cannot be conveyed in recording in cold print what was actually said. Attempting to reconstruct the scenes of wartime meetings from committee minutes and verbatim reports is like trying to rebuild a Roman villa from a handful of tiny floor mosaics.¹

If such are the shortcomings of the sources modern historians have to use, what is to be said of Roman wars where there is not a single minute, let alone a verbatim report of what was said between officers debating what moves were to be made in preparing for battle?

Inscriptions

Fortunately, beyond literature there are other important sources of Roman history. Hundreds of thousands of inscriptions in Latin and Greek, most inscribed on stone but some on metal, provide a great deal of information about the public and private life of individuals and cities throughout the Mediterranean and parts of Europe. Rome's earliest extant public document, for instance, is a religious inscription in archaic Latin in the shape of an obelisk known as the "Black Stone" (the *lapis niger*). It was found buried in the Roman Forum and dates from around 500 B.C. The most distinctive inscriptions are those recording the laws of cities, the

¹Andrew Roberts, *Masters and Commanders: How Four Titans Won the War in the West, 1941–1945* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), xxxv and xxxviii.

decisions of town senates, the regulations of cult, letters from emperors and governors, votes of honor, and the careers of notables.

The habit of erecting inscriptions (“the Epigraphic Habit” as it has been called) was not limited to institutional practice or the highest levels of society. For example, our only substantial body of information about the all-important centurions of the Roman army comes from inscriptions. Innumerable inscriptions commemorate the lives and deaths of individuals of every class, including freedmen and slaves. A gravestone put up by a slave woman at Rome reads simply *Zena, cocus*—“Zena, cook,” telling us that though she was a slave she was proud of her profession and well enough off to afford to have her gravestone cut in well carved letters on stone and properly displayed. Thousands of grave inscriptions help us understand the duties and affectionate relationships that Romans thought went into making a happy family. It comes perhaps as no surprise that most funerary monuments were put up by members of the nuclear family—husband and wives, parents and children, and siblings—to each other, while only five percent were put up to other kin such as grandparents, aunts and uncles outside the immediate nuclear family. Again, not surprisingly, the most common terms used to describe family members in these inscriptions were: *benemerens* (well deserved), *dulcissimus/a* (sweetest), *carissimus/a* (dearest). Another common term, *pius* (devoted), was used of parents, children, and siblings reciprocally, meaning that all members of the family were expected to be affectionately devoted—to have *pietas*—to each other. As a source of information, however, inscriptions have their limitations. They represent urban rather than rural life, for the most part the well-off rather than the poor, and some periods rather than others. Certain social groups, such as ex-slaves, tend to be overrepresented while the poor free citizen population is underrepresented. Despite the existence of huge numbers of tomb inscriptions which provide the deceased’s age at death, such inscriptions provide little of worth about life expectancy in the Greco-Roman world.

LITERACY Inscriptions tell us something about levels of literacy in the Roman world, but exactly what is hard to say. Probably a majority of scholars think literacy was most highly developed among members of the Roman elite (including women) and in the Roman Empire period (first century A.D. onward), among army officers and bureaucrats. Urban dwellers, who were surrounded by inscriptions, were likely to have been more literate than the inhabitants of the countryside. At a minimum, the former must have known enough to figure out basic abbreviations and formulas such as the omnipresent SPQR—“The Senate and the Roman People”—and some inscriptions such as epitaphs were so standardized that most everyone must have known what they meant. Longer, more complex inscriptions which contained laws, poems, official letters, philosophic doctrines and the like would have presented greater challenges.

Coins

Another important, but very different source of information about Roman history is coinage. Coins survive in huge numbers and varieties. They offer some



Image of SPQR from the Arch of Titus

The short formula "SPQR"—The Senate and the Roman People—summed up the ideology that underpinned the Roman state. Though often more Senate than People it expressed a basic truth about Rome so that even after the state came under the rule of emperors the formula was still used widely.

advantages over other ancient sources in that they were produced officially and thus convey the issuer's message directly. They also tell us how the issuers hoped to influence their target audience. Thus, for example, when the Italians revolted against Rome in 90 B.C. they struck coins depicting a bull (which stood for Italy) trampling a wolf (standing for Rome). After the revolt was put down, Rome issued coins proclaiming the reconciliation of Rome and Italy represented by two women holding hands. It was reconciliation, however, with a reminder of who won: One of the women—the Roman—has her foot on a globe of the earth. In his war with Mark Antony, Octavian—Julius Caesar's adopted son and heir—issued coins with the legend: "champion of the freedom of the Roman people" (*libertatis populi Romani vindex*). This had the double purpose of portraying Octavian as a traditional Roman (he was anything but) and making Antony seem like a foreign enemy. The fact that Antony was allied with Cleopatra and was headquartered in Egypt—far away and anyway exotic—helped give substance to this clever piece of propaganda.

Archaeology

Archaeology provides much of the information we have for early Rome and a good deal regarding the material culture of Rome in later periods. There are, how-



Coin Images: Italia, Roma, Aeneas

A. Italia and Roma clasp hands, but note that Roma has her foot on the globe indicating her preeminence. **B.** A coin issued by Julius Caesar around 47 or 46 B.C. showing Aeneas escaping from Troy, carrying his father and a statue of Athena (the Palladium). Caesar was here establishing his claim that his family, the *gens Julia*, as legend had it, was descended from the Trojan Aeneas and the goddess Venus.

ever, problems of interpretation and built-in biases in archaeology that are just as complex as those found in other sources. Cemeteries are often the most important (or only) source of information for ancient peoples. Modern cities or towns are at times located on ancient sites and make the archaeology of urban settlement spotty. Excavations for telephone cables, sewers, and subways bring to light artifacts of earlier occupation haphazardly and accidentally—that is, if the excavators do not rush to cover them up to prevent the archaeological authorities from intervening to stop or slow down the work.

The earliest archaeological excavations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were often no more than plundering expeditions in search of valuable pieces of art for museums or wealthy private collectors. Hence temples, palaces or villas were systematically looted for *objects d'art* while the artifacts of ordinary people were ignored and cast aside. To this day, while thousands of elite sites have been explored throughout the Mediterranean, the number of small farm sites excavated can be counted on a single hand. Careers are not made by excavating cottages, barns or stables. There is also a bias in terms of what is being looked for. In some excavations more recent levels (i.e. levels closer to the present) were frequently just shunted aside in favor of what was assumed to be the more “important” periods of the past, or for that matter, just the particular period in which the archaeologist in charge (or his or her sponsors) was interested. There was also a tendency to look for the supposed ancestors of a particular ethnic group or to burnish the past of the nation conducting the excavations.

To the extent that they can, modern archaeologists have labored to correct these tendencies. Many excavations are models of careful, scientific enterprises. Attention

The Battle of the Teutoburg Forest: A Victory for Freedom or a Defeat for Civilization?

An interesting example of the kinds of issues archaeology can raise for modern people is the discovery of the presumed site of the slaughter of three Roman legions by German tribesmen under their leader Arminius (later dubbed “Hermann the German”—his actual German name is unknown) in A.D. 9. An amateur archaeologist looking for coins stumbled on the site in 1987 and today a popular museum and park have been established on the spot. However, long before the discovery of the site of the great battle, Arminius had become a symbol for German nationalists. In 1808 a German playwright wrote a play, *Die Hermannsschlacht*—“Hermann’s Battle”—to stir up anti-Napoleonic sentiment and to urge Germans to unite for their freedom

as their ancestors had against the oppressive, imperialist Romans. A memorial statue to Arminius at Detmold, the presumed site of the battle in the nineteenth century, became a symbol of pan-German nationalism after the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871. Needless to say the French and others who suffered at the hands of German militarism interpreted the Roman loss not as a victory for freedom but as a triumph of barbarism and a catastrophic setback for civilization. What, the thinking went, would European history have been like if Germany had been successfully brought within the Roman Empire and “civilized?” The museum at Kalkriese, the presumed site of the battle, has a web site: <http://kalkriese-varusschlacht.de>.

is paid to a much wider spectrum of finds than in the past. Where funds are available, sites are studied for all aspects of the lives of the inhabitants. Pollen, seeds, bones, animal and human excreta are collected for analysis, along with the usual pottery, coins, mosaic tesserae etc. Locally made coarseware pottery, which in the past was passed over in favor of imported, high-status ceramics, is given increasing attention. Field or landscape archaeology, which surveys large tracts of the countryside for all signs of human habitation, has helped fill in the picture of the “silent majority”—the people without a past—especially the history of rural dwellers.

Making connections between a collection of material remains and a particular ethnic group is now a much more cautious affair than in the past, to the point where, in some instances, archaeology has virtually severed itself from the evidence of the written record. In some extreme cases history and archaeology have become two disconnected fields of the study of the past. Some problems, however, cannot be overcome even by the most conscientious excavators. Uneven geographical representation remains a problem and varies with the amount of time and resources a particular society is willing to put into archaeology. Some countries in western Europe have been combed by archaeologists for centuries while others, especially in the lesser developed countries of the Mediterranean, have little by way of an established archaeological record. This should be kept in mind when we consider the past before the existence of written records, and in the case of the vast majority of non-elite peoples who remained mute even after the upper classes acquired the techniques of record keeping. The record is often haphazard and full of pitfalls of cultural misrepresentation.

Despite the shortcomings of our sources, in their totality they constitute an amazing assemblage of materials. Pulling them together required the labor of thousands of highly competent, gifted scholars from dozens of countries over many centuries. Simply establishing the texts of the surviving written documents occupied generations of scholars since the Renaissance (not to mention the work done

by ancient scholars prior to that time). Epigraphists have labored to gather inscriptions from all over the Mediterranean and Black Sea areas, publish them and, where possible, preserve them in specialized museums and institutions. It is sad to read periodically of such-and-such an inscription that was seen by some scholar in a previous century but has now vanished—meaning that the stone was subsequently burned for lime or used for building purposes. Numismatists perform similar functions for coins.

Papyrologists sift through hundreds of thousands of fragments of early forms of paper (mostly papyrus, hence the name) found mainly in Egypt, to reconstruct valuable literary, economic, and social texts. Despite the shortcomings of archaeology, the problem for scholars today is how to absorb and properly use the mountains of evidence that generations of field work has produced.

CHRONOLOGY

Chronology of Roman History

Founding of Rome	753 B.C.
The Roman Republic	509–30 B.C.
The Early Empire (the Principate)	30 B.C.—A.D. 284
The Late Empire (the Dominate)	A.D. 284—A.D. 476
Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire	A.D. 476—A.D. 1453