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978-0-521-51819-2 - The Breakdown of the Roman Republic: From Oligarchy to Empire

Christopher S. Mackay

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

I have no doubt that for most readers the origins and the immediately subsequent period will offer less pleasure, and that they will hurry on to the present events in which the strength of the dominant nation is wearing itself out. For my own part, I will consider it to be another reward of my labor that as I recollect those pristine times I can, for a little while at least, turn away from the sight of the evils which our generation has seen for so many years. Please, I bid everyone for his own sake to pay close attention to what way of life there was then and the sorts of men and virtues by which rule was acquired both at home and abroad. Then, as discipline declines, let him follow in his mind the sinking, as it were, of character, and next how character declined more and more and then began to collapse headlong, until the present time was finally reached, when we can endure neither our faults nor cures. What is particularly beneficial and fruitful in considering historical events is for you to view instances of every sort of example set out in an illustrious precedent, and from it you may select for yourself and your state what you should imitate and what you should avoid since it is foul from beginning to end. In any case, unless my love of the work that I have undertaken deceives me, there was never any state that was greater or more devout or one which was richer in good examples, nor was there any body of citizens among whom greed and high living arrived so late or so much honor was given to modest means and frugal living for so long. The fewer possessions there were, the smaller the avarice, but recently riches have imported greed, and plentiful pleasures have imported the desire to ruin everything and to be ruined with high living and lust.

(Livy, *From the Foundation of the City*, Preface)

The historian Livy began writing his monumental history of the city of Rome during the turbulent 30s B.C., when the Roman world was wracked by the final stages of the civil wars that marked the demise of the Republican constitution. In his introduction, Livy exhibits his disgust with the present situation and contrasts his own attitude with the one that he attributes to

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[More information](#)

– THE BREAKDOWN OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC –

his audience, whose morbid curiosity he thinks will be drawn more to the calamities of their own times. For his part, Livy prefers the past, seeing his careful study of it as a way to ignore the unpleasant realities around him. Despite his desire to escape from his own period of time, he nonetheless imagines that he has an explanation for it.

In Livy's view, the troubles of the Late Republic were attributable to moral causes. In the early days of the Republic when there was little wealth, there was correspondingly less desire for it, and the upright men of those days used their moral rectitude to acquire an empire. Subsequently, however, increased wealth had two deleterious effects: material prosperity inspired greed, and the new decadent way of life resulted in a perverse desire for self-destruction. Livy is rather vague about the whole process, and he specifies neither when the change from the supposed virtue of the past began nor how exactly this putative decline in the moral tone of the national character resulted in this suicidal mania. Since Livy had little understanding of the exact nature of the problems in contemporary political life, much less what processes or developments had caused them, it is little wonder that the only solution he could find was to avert his eyes from the present and look longingly at the idealized picture he was drawing for himself of the good old days of the Early Republic. Livy was not the only man in the last days of the Republic to wonder how things had turned out so badly.

Writing perhaps a few years earlier and dealing with the political misfortunes that had taken place a few decades before, the historian Sallust had an explanation similar to Livy's:

After the Republic had expanded through hard work and justice, mighty kings had been conquered in war, fierce nations and huge peoples had been subdued by force, Carthage, the rival of the Roman empire, had been utterly destroyed, and all the seas and lands had been opened up, fortune began to rush about in havoc, throwing everything into confusion. Peace and wealth – things that are otherwise desirable – were an oppressive cause of misery for those who had easily endured hard work and danger and events both doubtful and dire. For this reason, there grew a greed first for money and then for rule, and these were like the raw material for all evils. For avarice overthrew good faith, honesty and all the other virtues, and in place of them it taught arrogance, cruelty, neglect of the gods, and the notion that everything was for sale. Self-serving ambition forced many men to become false, to have one thing closed up in their heart and another on the tip of their tongue, to consider their friendships and enmities not on the basis of fact but of advantage, and to keep their countenance good rather than their character. These things at first grew gradually and were occasionally punished, but when the contagion spread like the plague, the state was

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[More information](#)

– INTRODUCTION –

changed: what had been the best and most just empire became a cruel and unendurable one.

(Sallust, *Catilinarian Conspiracy* 10)

Here Sallust agrees with Livy in ascribing a perceived decline in the political situation of the Late Republic to moral causes that have to do with increased wealth. Greed undercut the good character that had prevailed in the earlier period when the Romans established their empire by defeating foreign kings and nations. Amidst the resulting wealth, greed sapped the traditional morality, and the desire for political office led men to abandon the objective honesty which had been the main Roman trait in favor of concealment of one's inner thoughts in the interest of achieving one's personal aims. Like Livy, Sallust characterizes this moral decline as a disease, but he is somewhat more specific than Livy in giving a date to this development. He states that it took place after the destruction (in 146 B.C.) of Carthage, Rome's first major overseas opponent, and elsewhere (*Jugurthine War* 41.2–3) he elaborates that while prior to the destruction of Carthage the Romans' fear of that city had forced them to remain virtuous, the removal of this fear through that city's overthrow had allowed high living and arrogance to flourish unchecked. But even if Sallust, unlike Livy, presents a chronological framework for this supposed decline in personal morality, he has no clearer idea of how exactly this decline resulted in the subsequent political troubles, nor does he have any solution. Like Livy, he withdrew from involvement in the contemporary world because of his disgust at it, and turned his attention to historical writing as a consolation and distraction (*Catilinarian Conspiracy* 4.4).

Writing in the late 30s B.C., in the midst of ongoing civil wars, the poet Horace viewed the situation in a similar, though vaguer, manner:

A second generation is now being worn down with civil wars,
and Rome herself collapses under her own strength.
The city which the neighboring Marsi or the Etruscan troop
of menacing Porsenna were unable to destroy,
which neither the manliness of rival Capua nor grim Spartacus
and the Allobrogan without faith in times of revolution
nor fierce Germany with her blue-eyed youth
or Hannibal, whom parents detest, conquered:
this city will we, an impious generation of accursed blood, destroy,
and the soil will again be inhabited by wild beasts.

(*Epode* 16.1–10)

While not as explicit in ascribing the ruin of the Late Republic to moral decline, Horace resembles the historians in attributing the cause to a fault

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[More information](#)

– THE BREAKDOWN OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC –

in the Romans themselves, whom he conceives of as working out some sort of curse that has been placed upon them. Like Livy, he thinks that the very strength of the Roman state was being used to destroy it, and like Sallust he contrasts the self-destruction of the present with the military victories of the past. Again like them, he has no solution for the evils of his times, and suggests a literary escape. He proposes that the “entire accursed state or at least the part that is better than the common herd” (lines 36–37) should set sail for the fabled Isles of the Blessed, where a Golden Age of peace and plenty has been hidden for the pious by the god Jupiter. Since there is no such place, he presumably means that literature provides the only refuge from the turmoil and civil war that was engulfing the Roman world.

Clearly, men of the Late Republic found the world in which they lived (and died) an appalling one and were grasping for an explanation of what had gone wrong with their state, which had only a few generations earlier enjoyed seemingly incredible military success in conquering the Mediterranean basin. Their only explanation was based on considerations of personal morality: somehow the disastrous cause of civil discord was to be sought in the failings of contemporary Romans, who had apparently deviated from the integrity which they took to be such a notable characteristic of their forebears. Since the Romans tended to view wealth with suspicion and were quite conscious of the extent to which the riches that had poured into Rome after the conquests greatly surpassed the resources available in early days of the Republic, it is not surprising that they chose to connect the apparent decline in morality with this increase in wealth and to imagine that these developments were at the root of the problem, even if the exact mode of causality was left unclear.

It is to be noted that all three of these analyses of the political problems of the Late Republic were written by men who would have possessed far more wealth than most of the citizenry. It would be nice to know what the average citizen, whether in his capacity as voter or soldier, thought about the turbulent events around him, but for the most part our information comes from texts written by wealthy individuals. The great majority of Romans, with comparatively little or no wealth, have left no record of their thoughts. What follows, then, is the story of how the office-holding class lost control of the political situation in Rome as the result of both structural faults and external pressures, and how the resulting military chaos was eventually brought under control through the covert establishment of an autocracy.

Two millennia later, the question of why the Republican form of government, which had been so successful in conquering the Mediterranean

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

– INTRODUCTION –

basin in a series of overseas campaigns from the mid third to the mid second centuries B.C., rapidly fell apart in the century from the death of Ti. Gracchus in 133 B.C. to the battle of Actium in 31 B.C. continues to attract popular interest, as is attested by the large number of books on the subject that have recently appeared in print (not to mention various television treatments ranging from a fictionalized miniseries on HBO to straightforward narratives on the History Channel). These books are written by nonacademics and so rely on out-of-date academic work and the sort of moralistic biographical interpretations that appear in the ancient sources; this kind of analysis tends to concentrate on individual behavior and leave out of consideration the structural problems of the Roman political system. There are also academic works on the subject, but they often deal with the minutiae of the linguistic interpretation of the Greek and Latin sources and are of comparatively limited use (or interest) for nonspecialists. Nonetheless, a discussion of the nature of the sources should prove useful to the general reader.

We have some documentary evidence in the form of inscriptions, but such sources are comparatively rare for the Republic (epigraphy provides much more evidence for the Empire). Hence, our information about the Late Republic is skewed by the nature of our literary sources. While these sources do provide a large amount of information, the picture they provide is limited by a number of considerations.

To begin with, there is no complete annalistic history (i.e., one that provides a synoptic view of affairs on a year-to-year basis) that survives for our period. Some stretches of history (for instance, the 110s B.C. and the 70s B.C.) happen to be comparatively poorly attested. This in part results from the biographical perspective that pervades a large number of our sources. Many of these are strongly focused on the personalities of individuals, so that our knowledge of periods that were not dominated by the sorts of personalities that appealed to the moralizing biographical authors who provide much of our information largely depends on unsatisfactory passing allusions in later works. Furthermore, even for the periods that are better known, the emphasis of the sources on the activities of prominent individuals has a tendency to distort the overall picture by viewing events from the perspective of those individuals and underappreciating the activities of the less conspicuous actors of history. This sort of concentration on individuals further distorts the picture given in the ancient sources by highlighting the actions (and motives) of specific individuals and paying little or no attention to broader themes. For instance, while Caesar's campaigns in Gaul mean that we are given a good overview of his activities (especially since he wrote a self-serving account of his

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[More information](#)

– THE BREAKDOWN OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC –

own that survives), the prolonged campaigns that brought the interior of the Balkans under Roman control are virtually unknown apart from the names and terms of office of the commanders, the dates of various defeats and victories, and some information about the triumphs in Rome that resulted from the latter. About the only ancient source that tries to paint a broader perspective is the five-book account of the *Civil Wars* written by Appian, who attempts to outline the role of violence in the political crisis of the Late Republic (an effort that is far from successful in that this obsessive interest in violence itself distorts the narrative).

A related consideration is the fact that the ancient sources with their fixation on important individuals have little sense of the broader social context of the events that they narrate. There are stray references to the interests and views of the lower strata of society, but these are few and far between. Basically, we are left in the dark about the attitudes of even the wealthy nonsenators in Rome, not to mention the small landowners of the Italian countryside or the landless rural population that eventually provided the soldiers whose depredations so demoralized Livy, Sallust, and Horace. Even in terms of the electoral process, something that should have been of some interest to the historical sources, the ancient authors provide little information about how voting was carried out and elections won (though the speeches and letters of Cicero go some way to make up this failing).

Even the stories told of the subjects of biographical interest are often determined more for the purpose of providing the reader with uplifting or salutary moral lessons than giving a thoughtful analysis of the historical significance of the events. In this regard, it is worthwhile to consider the words of Plutarch at the start of his biography of Alexander the Great. He overtly distinguishes the activity of a biographer from that of a historian, noting that a gesture or joke may say more about character than a major battle in which thousands died. Plutarch compares the biographer to a painter, whose aim is to give the viewer a sense of the subject's character through the subtle shading of detail rather than to give nothing but the outline of his features. (For a modern comparison, one might contrast a well-executed portrait with a casual snapshot.) Hence, much of the information that is provided by biographical and other moralizing sources cannot be taken at face value.

In connection with this, it is worth pointing out that most of the sources that we have are what would be called in modern terms “secondary sources.” That is, they were not written by contemporaries but by later authors (often centuries after the fact) who had to rely on previous accounts to compose their own version of events. This means

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[More information](#)

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that writers under the Empire often had a weak sense of the political realities of the Republic, and in any case the tradition that survives in later authors often reflects a historical analysis that is based on a double form of distortion. First, the historical tradition was established by the well-to-do, and hence by definition tends to be pro-senatorial and hence hostile to those who were perceived (rightly or wrongly) as having acted against the senate's interests. Second, as the truism has it, history is written by the victors. While this is not entirely true, it is the case that for periods involving civil war, the ancient historical assessment was drawn up in favor of the victors. It is only the history of the period from the late 60s to the late 40s B.C., which is attested by the accounts of Caesar and the speeches, letters, and essays of Cicero, that largely rests on contemporary evidence. This is far and away the best attested period of classical antiquity (though even for it we have to make use of later works, and much remains unknown).

The preservation of a historical work from antiquity is determined by the literary tastes of Late Antiquity and the later vicissitudes of fate. In Late Antiquity, the older practice of writing texts on papyrus was replaced with the use of vellum (animal skin), and this change meant that virtually all texts that were not copied over in the new medium were lost. The new material was expensive, and for the most part only works that were esteemed for literary (aesthetic) reasons were copied over and hence preserved. Even if a work was copied, this did not guarantee that the text would be preserved through the Middle Ages until the dissemination of texts through printing began in the early modern period. The upshot is that much of the ancient literary tradition about the Late Republic has been lost for reasons that have little or nothing to do with the inherent value of those sources.

These considerations about the failings of the ancient sources may make it sound as if it is not possible to get any but a very limited sense of the history of the ancient world. While it is true that the limitations of the sources have to be borne in mind, the intensive study of these texts over many, many years has made it possible to overcome their deficiencies and to use them to answer questions that probably never occurred to the ancients. At the most basic level, the process of source criticism has been developed to sift through conflicting accounts and to determine the actual course of events (though this procedure can go only so far, since some events are related by only one source). On a more interpretive level, from the stray information provided by Cicero and others it is possible to reconstruct the general nature of the electoral system (even if the specifics are unclear and its operation in a given instance is mostly unrecoverable).

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[More information](#)

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The present work is an attempt to answer the question that so puzzled the likes of Livy, Sallust, and Horace: why did the Republican form of government break down and come to be replaced by the military autocracy that became the Roman Empire? The answer is given largely in the form of a general narrative of the last century of the Republic that is dominated by the lives of the important individuals whose stories figure so prominently in the ancient sources. While the lives of these figures will by necessity play a very prominent role in the narrative, the tack taken here is more or less the exact opposite of that advocated by Plutarch. Whereas he preferred the sometimes seemingly insignificant personal details that illuminate character at the expense of the broader historical events because of which these men were important, here these lives enter the narrative only to the extent that they are relevant to the story of how the use of violence to attain political aims spiraled out of control and quickly made the old form of government unworkable. The personal quirks and proclivities, the sexual habits and physical appearance of the great men of the past – topics that fascinated the ancients – are not treated here.

A number of factors contributed to the breakdown of the Republican government. The use of violence in domestic politics first came to be considered appropriate in very narrow circumstances in 133 B.C., and by the end of the second century B.C., it was already widespread in the assemblies in Rome. The use of political violence took a more ominous turn when it was extended to the Roman military. Down to 107 B.C., the Roman soldiery was conscripted from landowners (however small their holdings), but after that the rural poor were the main source of recruits, and it turned out that generals could take advantage of their soldiers' interests to further their own objectives. The fall of the Republic would take many twists and turns, and a number of potential alternative developments were possible, but for the most part, once it became possible for military leaders to use the public forces of violence at their disposal for their own purposes, the old form of government was doomed. The military needs of the empire that the Romans had acquired were such that there was no way to avoid laying huge forces in the hands of certain generals, yet there was no institutional means of controlling the behavior of these generals, and it was inevitable that these forces would be used to further the ambitions of generals once the political restraints on the use of violence for personal ends fell by the wayside. The following narrative aims to make sense of these developments and to show how the (partially) concealed military autocracy that would be erected by the first Roman emperor was an effective way of bringing order to the bloody chaos into which the Republic had collapsed. In addition to the main narrative, the book

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[More information](#)

– INTRODUCTION –

contains a series of coin illustrations that give a visual representation of the process by which individuals usurped for themselves the state power that had previously been exercised in a collective manner by the senatorial oligarchy and eventually resulted in the personification of state power in the form of the first emperor.

Given the audience of general readers and introductory students for which the book is intended, I have eschewed extended argument with other interpretations of individual points in favor of giving a relatively unitary presentation of my own views. The reader should therefore be warned that there is hardly any point in this book which some scholar would not wish to dispute. Weighing the book down with large numbers of references to the views of others (often in foreign languages) would make it cumbersome to read without doing much to illuminate the intended audience. The purpose is to give the general reader not simply an outline of the events of the last century of the Republic but also an interpretive framework that analyzes the events in terms of the broader trends and developments that made the old system of government unworkable and necessitated its replacement with a veiled despotism. With this general interpretation and narrative in mind, the reader is strongly encouraged to read the ancient sources to see how they present the events and to read more detailed technical works to find out how these may elaborate, modify, or even contradict the views expressed here. To this end, a running list of ancient citations for the facts in the text is given at the end, and the bibliography should help the reader find further discussions of various topics. I hope that this book will prove to be useful both for those who are interested in Republican history in its own right and for those whose primary aim is to read some of the many ancient historical sources that were written during or about the fall of the Republic and wish to understand the underlying political realities of those tempestuous times.

To help the reader make sense of the broader significance of events, I have added at the end of each chapter a series of questions that should facilitate understanding of the relationship of the specific details of the chapter to the overall themes of the book. There is also an appendix at the end on the complicated system of Roman nomenclature. The reader may wish to peruse this before starting the main text, as the at times varying nomenclature used in the text presupposes a familiarity with the principles governing the use of Roman names.

Finally, all translations are my own.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

ORIGINS OF ROME

The Roman historical tradition held that the city of Rome was founded in the year 753 B.C. or thereabouts. Modern archaeology shows that there was no single date of foundation. Instead, the hills that were eventually included within the city were gradually occupied during the Iron Age beginning around 900 B.C. These early settlements were sparsely populated farming communities, but as in many other locations in Italy, Rome soon developed more advanced social and economic structures. These trends are marked by much more elaborate buildings that began to appear in the 600s B.C., and by the 500s B.C. Rome was ruled by a monarchy. In the last decade of that century, wealthy landowners overthrew the last king and established the form of government known as the Republic (this is traditionally dated to 509 or 507 B.C.). Under the Republic, the Romans would conquer first Italy and then the Mediterranean world, but while the institutions of the Republic were suitable for waging wars of conquest, they proved incapable of maintaining those conquests or of dealing with the problems that ensued from them.

POPULUS ROMANUS, PLEBS, AND NOBILITY

The Middle Republic was a period of comparative stability, and the political system that allowed the Romans to establish their hegemony over Italy and the Mediterranean basin was the result of the fourth-century settlement that put an end to the domestic unrest that had characterized the Early Republic.¹ In the half century after the foundation of the

¹ “Early Republic” refers to the period before the Romans began to write literary historical accounts. Though the later tradition preserves an account for this period, the