

ANCIENT ROME

A MILITARY AND POLITICAL HISTORY

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INTRODUCTION

This book is intended to provide a general introduction to the public affairs of the Roman People for a reader with no prior knowledge of the subject. As an introduction to public affairs, the work concentrates on political institutions and activities and thus could be considered to reflect a “traditional” view of history. Much modern scholarship, on the other hand, has turned to new perspectives on the past, for example social history that examines the lives and experiences of the lower-class population, women and slaves, segments of the population that are generally ignored by the ancient sources; cultural history that investigates the interaction between the Romans and the foreign peoples with whom they came into contact during their conquest of Italy and then the Mediterranean; and economic history that studies the economic patterns and institutions that played a large role in determining the political structure of the Republic and Empire. These and other topics not treated here would undoubtedly deepen the analysis but at the cost of inordinately expanding the length of the work and of obscuring the purpose that it is intended to serve. It is my view that the new historical disciplines complement rather than supplant traditional history. My aim, then, is to provide a readable and up-to-date general history on the basis of the numerous refinements in our understanding of traditional political history that have been made in recent years.

The desire to make this work both concise and readable has led to two decisions that the reader must always bear in mind. The first has to do with the nature of the source material available for ancient history. In studying modern (and even much of medieval) history, it is generally possible to take the overall course of events for granted, and the task becomes one of deciding how to interpret the evidence. This is seldom the case with ancient history. The surviving literary sources are often written many years (even centuries) after the facts they record on the basis of unknown intermediate sources.

Contemporary documentary sources in the form of inscriptions, papyri, and the legends of coins are extant for some periods, but the extent to which such sources can supplement the literary evidence is limited. The upshot is that very frequently there are discrepancies in the sources, and a large part of the job of historians of antiquity is to attempt to use various forms of source criticism to evaluate the divergent information available in order to recreate the reality of the historical events narrated in the ancient sources. Hence, there is virtually no declarative statement in this work that could not be qualified with expressions like “most likely” and “apparently.” No doubt a full-scale discussion of Roman history would entail constant reference to the (often uncertain) evidence that lies behind the analysis, but such an elaborate (and confusing) procedure would obviate the very limited goal of the present work. I have therefore restricted myself to a short discussion of the sources of information available at the start of each of the five parts into which the book is divided and provide in the corresponding section of the bibliography a concise listing of the main sources. No one is more aware than I am of the extent to which our understanding of antiquity is dependent upon the subjective interpretation of the evidence.

The result of this uncertainty inherent to the ancient evidence is that there is much scholarly dispute not simply about the interpretation of events but often about the mere course of events. This, in turn, means that alternative scholarly views are available for practically every statement I make. To go into detailed discussion of those alternatives and to argue at length for my own position would defeat the purpose of this book. My aim is to give the novice student of Roman history a general overview of the developments of more than a millennium of history, and my hope is that this book will stimulate the reader to delve into the literature on specific points and see both what the available evidence is and why various scholars interpret it as they do. If this work achieves this modest goal, I will be content.

Because Roman personal names appear so frequently in the text, an appendix provides a discussion of the Roman system of nomenclature, which differs significantly from our own.