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FROM WORLD POWER TO WORLD STATE:
AN INTRODUCTION

In the late 40s BCE, a disillusioned politician and officer of Julius Caesar named Sallust withdrew from public life and began writing history. His first work was a short account of a plot to overthrow the Roman Republic two decades earlier by a disreputable senator, Catiline. Sallust found the topic agreeable because it illustrated his belief that there had been a total deterioration in the values that underpinned public life. To get ahead in Rome at the time, Sallust claimed, you had to lie, bribe, sleep around, steal, and use violence. He admitted that even he had been less than pure. He offered no details. But a contemporary of his, Varro, alleged that Sallust was caught with another senator's wife, flogged, and let go only after paying a bribe.

Having introduced Catiline early in his work, Sallust next traced the rise of the Roman state to its greatness and then the means by which it “became the worst and most shameful.” By his account: after the Romans threw out the kings who ruled them and established a republican government around 500 BCE, the newly won freedom inspired men to seek glory. They took pleasure in armor and warhorses rather than “prostitutes and parties.” Every soldier wanted to be the first over the enemy walls. Men honored the gods and cared for their families. But once Rome destroyed its imperial rival Carthage in 146, Sallust wrote, individual greed and ambition were ascendant. Roman soldiers became more interested in love affairs and drinking. Their generals robbed temples and built villas the size of cities. Lust for conquest fueled the expansion of the overseas empire, but the greed that accompanied it led to the civil war that eventually destroyed the Republic.

For the nearly two millennia since Sallust's time, it has been hard to shake his pessimistic view of Rome after the fall of Carthage. Modern historians regularly write articles and books on the century ending in Julius Caesar's assassination in 44 BCE and focus on the factors that led to the end of the Republic. So entrenched is the idea of the “fall of the Roman Republic” that

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it recurs in political debate and popular culture. Critics of the Vietnam War spoke darkly of a nascent “American empire” and suggested that the fate of the United States would be that of republican Rome’s. Similar claims were made during the presidency of George W. Bush. In his 2007 book, *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic*, Chalmers Johnson argued that Bush’s militarism had placed America on the path to dictatorship. Meanwhile, the first season of the HBO/BBC miniseries *Rome* (2005) presented viewers with a semifictionalized history of the end of the Republic dominated by brutish soldiers and sexually voracious women. One episode was called “How Titus Pullo Brought Down the Republic.”

Accounts like these resonate powerfully in an era of anxiety, but they overlook a series of remarkable achievements that followed swiftly after Sallust first laid out his interpretation. Just 20 years after the historian began his dark work, Vergil was finishing what all agree is the singular masterpiece of Latin literature, his epic *Aeneid*. In this poem, Rome’s empire is reconceived as a force for good, spreading peace over the world. Indeed, by the time of Vergil’s death in 19 BCE – a quarter century after Caesar’s assassination – there was an unprecedented level of peace across the Mediterranean and in the lands beyond. New cities were springing up in western Europe, with bustling marketplaces, marble temples, theaters, and heated baths. Roads and bridges were built to connect them – feats of engineering still used today in some cases. All this was possible because Julius Caesar’s heir, Augustus, commonly regarded as Rome’s first emperor, ushered in a new era of stable government able to administer the vast empire more effectively than it had been before. Augustus himself went on extended tours of inspection throughout the empire. He ensured that revenues were collected as efficiently and fairly as possible, and used them to fund a standing army that was essential for maintaining peace. Commerce flourished as never before.

Throughout this book, in a sort of shorthand, I refer to the Roman state of Augustus’ day as the “world state.” Obviously Rome did not literally embrace the entire world. But it did encompass all the main centers of ancient Mediterranean civilization and areas farther north, which was unprecedented. What is more, in the lifetime of Augustus, hundreds of thousands of men and women gained Roman citizenship, and tens of thousands of them lived as far away from Rome as Spain and the Middle East. This huge network helped work out new answers to the question of what it meant to be Roman. People read the *Aeneid*, dined off of fine Italian pottery, celebrated Augustus’ birthday as a holiday, and sacrificed to the gods on his behalf. Noncitizens joined them in these activities, and in the process started to become Roman too. The new customs knitted the world together in ways that older traditions of citizenship, focused on city-state activities like listening to speeches in the main square of Rome, could not.

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To focus obsessively on the “fall of the Roman Republic” not only minimizes all of these political accomplishments and related innovations in literature, commerce, and religion. It also obscures the fact that much of Rome’s transformation into a world state happened in the century leading up to the widely known Ides of March in 44 BCE. We need to recognize that it was during the long “fall of the Roman Republic” that a more ambitious provincial administration was being developed, along with a more coherent vision of empire that promised lasting peace in exchange for loyalty to Rome and the payment of taxes. It was during “the fall of the Roman Republic” that the city of Rome itself became a cultural and intellectual center that eclipsed other Mediterranean cities and could rightly proclaim Roman power. This book starts in the year 150 BCE and continues to the year 20 CE, soon after Augustus was peacefully succeeded by Tiberius. It traces achievements that have gotten too little notice from Sallust and others since him, who have concentrated on the fall of the Republic.

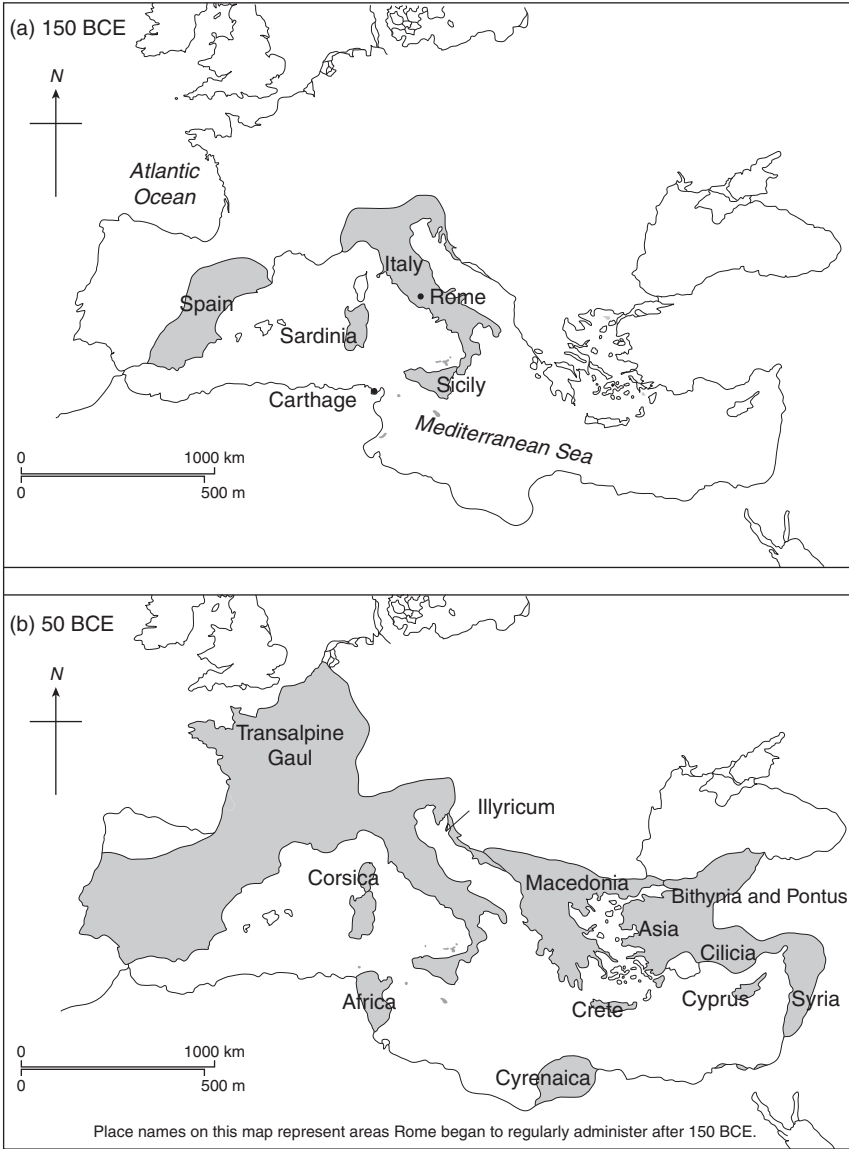
THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF ROME

At the outset, it will be helpful to offer a brief sketch of Rome in 150 BCE, the changes it underwent in the next century or so, and an overall framework for thinking about those changes. We can focus on the overseas empire, culture, and then politics.

In 150 BCE, Rome was the dominant state in the Mediterranean. The Roman Senate regularly sent out military commanders to oversee parts of Spain and the islands of Sicily and Sardinia. To other areas, it issued instructions drafted in Rome or by delegations of senators on the spot. Overall, administration was minimal. During the following century, Rome gained tighter control of a much vaster territory that stretched from northwestern Europe to Africa, Asia Minor, and the Middle East. By 50 BCE there were more than a dozen provinces across three continents, with Roman governors who ensured that taxes were collected and that basic order was maintained. They defended the interests of thousands of Roman citizens living overseas. There was, however, no standing army. Legions were raised as needed and then disbanded, and soldiers increasingly looked to their commanders for rewards upon discharge, especially grants of land and money.

Throughout the same century, there was profound cultural transformation. In 154 BCE, a stone theater with seats was under construction in the city of Rome. Before it could be completed, though, the Senate voted to demolish it. Conservatives thought it was all too Greek: real Romans, they said, should be tough enough to stand. A hundred years later, Rome had a massive marble theater. Attached was an art-filled portico that served as a favorite pickup spot,

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Map 1 Growth in Areas Administered by Rome, 150–50 BCE

according to contemporary poets. Houses, too, were decorated with Greek-style sculptures, paintings, and marble columns that proclaimed the taste of their owners. Romans were now embracing the flamboyance and individualism that characterized Greek culture after the conquests of Alexander the Great. By 44 BCE, they were writing autobiographies and even poems about their love affairs.

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As for politics, in the mid-second century BCE, Rome was a republic, governed by its people. In fact, the official name of the state was the “Roman People.” Treaties by other states were always made with the Roman People. Among themselves, Romans referred to the state as the *res publica*, a phrase that literally meant “commonwealth.” Power ultimately resided with the Roman People – which in practice meant the male citizens who came together in assemblies held in the city of Rome. There they would elect magistrates and vote on legislation presented to them by magistrates currently in office. Past and present magistrates, numbering altogether a couple of hundred men, formed the Senate, which set much of the Republic’s policy. Senators, who typically served for life, managed Rome’s budget, guided relations with other states, and determined which magistrates would have military command and where. Because of the Senate’s importance, the government was often conceived of as the “Senate and People of Rome” (*senatus populusque Romanus*), conveniently abbreviated “SPQR.”

Despite a seeming continuity, government by SPQR went through many changes in the century following 150 BCE. The Senate more or less doubled in size, and the rules governing admission to it changed. The number of magistrates increased too. A bedrock principle of Rome’s republic was that magistrates should only hold office for a term of one year and that power should always be shared with at least one fellow magistrate. But from the late second century BCE onward, the principle was increasingly violated. The great general Gaius Marius held the top office of consulship five years in a row, from 104 to 100 BCE. Later, Julius Caesar’s rival Pompey was granted extraordinary power for most of the 60s BCE in order to fight pirates menacing the Mediterranean Sea and then one of the most dangerous foreign enemies Rome ever faced, King Mithridates of Pontus in northern Asia Minor. Along with individuals gaining unprecedented levels of power came another change: even as the institutions of SPQR endured, for extended periods of time their legitimacy was directly challenged. Leaders relied on soldiers and street fighters in Rome to get their way. Swords and daggers replaced speeches, laws, and voting.

In 44 BCE, citizens still gathered in their assemblies and the Senate still met. In reality, though, Rome was ruled by Julius Caesar, who held the ominous title of Dictator for Life. It was Caesar, along with his personal staff, who managed finances and set foreign policy. Caesar would convene the People to “elect” the men he chose. At the end of 45, one of the consuls died and Caesar had an officer of his appointed for a single day in a sham election. Caesar’s enemy, the great orator Cicero, darkly joked, “When this fellow was consul, no crime was committed. His vigilance was extraordinary! Throughout his whole consulship he didn’t sleep a wink!” A few months later, Caesar was assassinated. Cicero, who sympathized with the assassins, hoped he could bring

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back traditional republican government but failed. Instead, 15 years of civil war followed, in the midst of which Sallust wrote his pessimistic histories.

Throughout his published works, Sallust tied political developments firmly to moral decline. Given that the Roman state was its People, there was logic to this approach. His argument was that the fear of Carthage had united Romans. Once the fear was removed, nobles and ordinary men alike began grabbing what they could for themselves individually. On the whole, the nobles did much better, taking the lion's share of the profits of the growing empire, but a few nobles were willing to challenge their peers and stand up for ordinary people. The politicians' violent quarrels soon descended into armed violence, in a dangerous spiral.

Modern historians have tended to be skeptical of Sallust's emphasis on morality. For one thing, there already were voices of doom in the second century BCE. The historian Lucius Calpurnius Piso lamented the collapse of sexual morals and the influx into Rome, before the destruction of Carthage, of such dangerous Greek luxuries as one-legged tables. If morality had already declined by then, how did the Republic survive as long as it did? Still, it is important to take into account voices like those of Piso and Sallust to gain insight into how Romans understood the profound changes their society was undergoing. Moreover, Sallust deserves respect for attempting to give a coherent theory of how Rome's acquisition of an empire, its cultural development, and its political revolution were intertwined. Like Sallust, most practicing historians today will never be content to see Rome's development after 150 BCE as just a series of more-or-less accidental events.

THE SPOILS OF EMPIRE

Ultimately, students should decide for themselves how to explain the transformations of Rome, including the "fall of the Roman Republic." The narrative that follows is meant to help in that task. But no narrative can be written without its author having some view of what really matters, and so I briefly set out my own here. Too often, historians have limited themselves to just one of the strands described above: politics, cultural affairs, and foreign affairs. I believe they were intertwined, and I try to bring them together by developing an insight by the historian Keith Hopkins that the wealth flooding into Rome and Italy from the growing empire led to structural differentiation in society. Distinct new groups arose, such as financiers, a large urban population, and a wealthy ruling class in the towns of Italy. These groups clashed over the spoils of empire, as did the senators themselves.

While modern historians can isolate interest groups such as financiers in their analysis, we should note that the Romans themselves divided society into

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a hierarchy of groups with officially defined status. These groups were sometimes referred to as “orders,” a concept that survives today in the idea of a religious or fraternal order like the Masons. A fundamental status distinction separated those with full Roman citizenship from those without. Although only men could vote, women could be citizens. All slaves lacked citizenship, as did free members of other communities. By 150 BCE, some Italian communities had been granted Roman citizenship; the rest, whether they liked it or not, were “allies” of Rome, required to fight Rome’s wars. This would change with a great rebellion that began in 91 BCE and ended a few years later with the granting of citizenship across Italy. This was one of the most momentous developments in all of Roman history, crucial for the later spread of citizenship in the world state.

Among male citizens, there were two distinguished groups. One was made up of senators – basically current or former magistrates. Since all magistrates had to be elected, there was no formal hereditary aristocracy in Rome, although some families were successful generation after generation. These were the “nobles” Sallust writes about so scathingly. A select group who claimed descent back to Rome’s earliest days were the patricians. Everybody else, including, by 150 BCE, some highly distinguished families, was plebeian.

The second distinguished group was the Equestrians. In earlier times Rome’s cavalry (hence their name), these were men who met a high property requirement. It was really in the 120s BCE that they became an order in society distinct from the Senate. Many were involved in executing the massive contracts the Roman government issued to supply armies or collect revenues in the empire, in lieu of a civil service. The growth of the Equestrians into a distinct constituency particularly associated with lucrative government subcontracting is an excellent example of structural differentiation.

Other large, distinctive groups developed, such as the inhabitants of the city of Rome. There were much smaller groups too, including new specialists who did not exist when Rome was a small city with access to few resources. We could consider here the rise of legal experts, teachers of rhetoric, architects, and even love poets.

Hopkins’ point about structural differentiation was that as Roman society grew more complex, government by SPQR had difficulty coping with the change. Italians thought they deserved greater recognition for their contribution to the growth of empire; the inhabitants of Rome thought that with all the wealth coming into Rome, they should get grain at a fair price. But the Senate and the People did not always agree, and they often became split over what to do. Senators’ fights with one another were the most devastating to peace, because it was really only in the Senate that

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compromises could be hammered out. The People, able only to pass laws presented to them, could not make deals to end deadlock. In their struggles, senators enlisted the support of new groups or specialists, like the rhetoric teachers and the architects. Battles were fought in speeches and building projects, parades and festivals. All of these lent splendor to the age. But to the extent that these endeavors increasingly supported great leaders, they undermined the republican principle of limiting individuals' power.

If empire brought fights over spoils and heightened competition among politicians, it also was more directly destabilizing. In toppling or weakening other Mediterranean powers without investing many of their own resources to maintain security, the Romans precipitated a series of foreign crises. These included pirate raids, two slave rebellions in Sicily, and ultimately the major revolutionary movement in Asia Minor in the 80s BCE initiated by the opportunistic King Mithridates. At times of civil war, the sprawling empire allowed rival Roman leaders to carve out alternate states for themselves, such as in Spain. Empire fostered and fueled political conflict of the most dangerous sort. On this point, Sallust was essentially correct.

BEYOND THE “FALL OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC”

Already it should be starting to become clear that there are advantages to thinking of the period from 150 BCE to 20 CE as a whole rather than accepting the traditional split of “The Last Age of Roman Republic” and “The Augustan Empire.” Understanding the successes of government by emperors can reveal the weaknesses of SPQR, such as its inability to deal with army veterans and its difficulty in stopping the uncontrolled use of armed force. Yet we can also see more clearly how late republican leaders, however much they might have upset their contemporaries, were innovators of lasting importance, perhaps none more so than Pompey. To go back even further, the famous Gracchus brothers of the 130s and 120s BCE always loom large in accounts of the “fall of the Roman Republic.” As politicians, both pushed through reforms dealing with the distribution of land and the sale of grain. Both aroused fierce controversy. Tiberius Gracchus and several hundred of his supporters were clubbed to death by a mob led by Rome's chief priest. Tiberius' younger brother Gaius and Gaius' supporters met a similarly grisly end. It is traditional to emphasize how the violence of these years undermined republican government. But from a longer view, we can also see that the brothers' ideas about finance and empire started a century-long process of reimagining the Roman state to suit an increasingly complex social and political reality.

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FURTHER READING

Good surveys of the century or so of change from 146 to 44 BCE are *The Cambridge Ancient History* (2nd ed.) Vol. 9 (with a helpful preliminary chapter); P. A. Brunt, *Fall of the Roman Republic* (1988); M. Beard and M. Crawford, *Rome in the Late Republic* (2nd ed.; London, 1999); C. Steel, *The End of the Roman Republic, 146 to 44 BC* (Edinburgh, 2013). For a detailed political narrative that goes through the death of Augustus, see C. S. Mackay, *The Breakdown of the Roman Republic* (Cambridge, 2009). Older, but still valuable for politics and war, is H. H. Scullard, *From the Gracchi to Nero* (5th ed.; London, 1982). T. P. Wiseman's *Remembering the Roman People* (Oxford, 2011) is a series of typically vivid essays by a master in the field. T. Holland's *Rubicon: The Triumph and Tragedy of the Roman Republic* (London, 2004) and its sequel *Dynasty: The Rise and Fall of the House of Caesar* (London, 2015) are unmatched for their portraits of the major personalities.

Broader works on the Roman Republic are H. I. Flower (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Republic* (2nd ed.; Cambridge, 2014), and N. Rosenstein and R. Morstein-Marx (eds.), *A Companion to the Roman Republic* (Oxford, 2006, with a good chapter by the editors on "The Transformation of the Republic"). H. I. Flower's *Roman Republics* (Princeton, 2011) emphasizes discontinuities in an original fashion.

Rome's economic history has been boldly reinterpreted in recent work; two valuable guides are W. Scheidel (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Economy* (Cambridge, 2012), and W. Scheidel, I. Morris, and R. P. Saller (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World* (Cambridge, 2008). For the cultural history treated in this book, A. Wallace-Hadrill's *Rome's Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, 2008) is foundational. "Structural differentiation" is discussed by Keith Hopkins in his pioneering work *Conquerors and Slaves* (Cambridge, 1978), and its importance is emphasized in penetrating remarks by M. H. Crawford, "States Waiting in the Wings: Population Distribution and the End of the Roman Republic," in L. de Ligt and S. Northwood (eds.), *People, Land and Politics: Demographic Developments and the Transformation of Roman Italy, 300 BC–AD 14* (Leiden, 2008), 631–43 (the whole collection is useful).

More sweeping works usefully situate late republican Rome: G. Woolf, *Rome: An Empire's Story* (Oxford, 2012); D. S. Potter, *Ancient Rome: a New History* (2nd ed.; New York, 2014); M. Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (London, 2015); and the picturesque R. Lane Fox, *The Classical World: An Epic History from Homer to Hadrian* (London, 2005).

On the history of Rome in popular memory see T. P. Wiseman, *The Myths of Rome* (Exeter, 2004), especially chap. 10, "The Dream That Was Rome"; P. Burton, "Pax Romana/Pax Americana: Perceptions of Rome in American Political Culture, 2000–2010," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 18 (2011), 66–104; M. Wyke, *Caesar in the USA* (Berkeley, 2012).