

## LAW AND POWER IN THE MAKING OF THE ROMAN COMMONWEALTH

With a broad chronological sweep, this book provides a historical account of Roman law and legal institutions which explains how they were created and modified in relation to political developments and changes in power relations. It underlines the constant tension between two central aspects of Roman politics: the aristocratic nature of the system of government, and the drive for increased popular participation in decision making and the exercise of power. The traditional balance of power underwent a radical transformation under Augustus, with new processes of integration and social mobility brought into play. Professor Capogrossi Colognesi brings into sharp relief the deeply political nature of the role of Roman juridical science as an expression of aristocratic politics and discusses the imperial jurists' fundamental contribution to the production of an outline theory of sovereignty and legality which would constitute, together with Justinian's gathering of Roman legal knowledge, the most substantial legacy of Rome.

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MAKING OF THE ROMAN  
COMMONWEALTH

LUIGI CAPOGROSSI COLOGNESI

Translated by  
LAURA KOPP



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*To Peter Garnsey*

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## *Acknowledgments*

Once a new book is on its way to the printer, we can finally turn to the pleasant task of writing words of thanks and acknowledgment for all those who in various ways have helped us in our work. The peculiarity in this case is that the text published here is quite new and different compared to that planned originally – a translation into English of a book published in Italian in 2009. One of my aims for the Italian edition was to write in a way that could be understood by non-specialist readers who had an interest in ancient history. The same commitment informs this book, although it has another, and much broader, audience. The translation had to be approached with sensitivity to cultural differences, and in this respect the work done by Laura Kopp, the translator, and subsequently by many English-speaking friends and my excellent editors at Cambridge University Press, Michael Sharp and Elizabeth Hanlon, could not have been better.

In the process, the book has been transformed. It has been a thoroughly novel experience and, I think, quite a rare one, for an older and fairly well-known author, with a work that he thought completed, to encounter a master of our discipline who with extraordinary generosity, patience, expenditure of time, and philological meticulousness, has guided him in rewriting an already written book. Peter Garnsey has reread the text word by word, acting as only a good teacher can in helping a young person embark on his scientific adventure, correcting his errors, giving him suggestions of all kinds, providing bibliographical references, discussing ideas and structure. The English text, but also the revised Italian edition I will publish in its wake, is very different, and better, I think, than the *Diritto e potere* which appeared in 2009.

For this reason, and returning to my acknowledgments, to those whose help often proved crucial ever since the first Italian edition I must now add those who have accompanied me in this venture, which turned out to be so new and different. Many of them are the same friends whose generosity and knowledge I have always relied on: from Andrea Giardina, Francesco

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As for Peter, I will say it again: the hundreds of pages of our correspondence during these years testify to the great debt I owe him, but above all they stand as the record of an extraordinary friendship. This book, to which he has contributed so much, is dedicated to him.

## *Chronology*

### BC

753	foundation of Rome according to Atticus and Varro
616–578	reign of Tarquinius Priscus
578–534	reign of Servius Tullius; introduction of centuriate organization
534–509	reign of Tarquinius Superbus
509–508	first year of the republic
509	Polybius' first Roman–Carthaginian treaty
509 or 507	dedication of the Capitoline Temple
508–507	Lars Porsenna from Chiusi besieged Rome
499 or 496	Rome against the Latins in the battle of Lake Regillus
494–493	first secession; creation of the plebeian tribunate
493	Cassian Treaty between Rome and Latins
486–485	agrarian proposals of Spurius Cassius and his execution for aiming at the tyranny
483–474	first Veientan war and defeat of the Fabii at Cremera
451–450	creation of the first and the second decemvirate to write Roman laws
450	approval of the Twelve Tables
446	introduction of the quaestors
445	Canuleian plebiscite for the marriage of plebeians and patricians
444	first consular tribunes appointed
443	first censors appointed
437–426	second Veientan war
409	first plebeian quaestors
400	first plebeian consular tribunes
406–396	third Veientan war and capture of Veii
395–393	conquest of Capena, Falerii, and Labici

xiv	<i>Chronology</i>
390	Gallic conquest of Rome
387	Stellatina, Tromentina, Sabatina, and Arnensis tribes created
376–367	political troubles between patricians and plebeians culminating in the passage of the Licinio–Sextian rogations on debt; public land and admission of plebeians to consulship
366	institution of praetorship and curule aedilship
351	first plebeian censor
343	first Samnite war
339	<i>leges Publiliae</i> on <i>patrum auctoritas</i> in advance of legislative assemblies and on validity of plebiscites
338	dissolution of Latin League and Roman settlement of Latium
336	first plebeian praetor
326	<i>lex Poetelia</i> suppresses <i>nexum</i>
326–304	second Samnite war
312	ensorship of Appius Claudius Caecus; initiation of via Appia and Appian aqueduct; reorganization of tribal registration
310–308	consolidation of Roman power in central Italy
304	Gnaeus Flavius, a freedman's son, becomes <i>aedile curule</i>
296–295	Samnites and Gauls wage war against Rome and are defeated
290	conclusion of the third Samnite war
287–283	via Clodia and via Caecilia begun
281	Rome attacks Tarentum which appeals to Pyrrhus
280	Pyrrhus crosses to Italy and defeats Romans at Heraclea
275	definitive defeat of Pyrrhus by Romans at Malventum (Beneventum)
272	Tarentum taken
270	Rhegium captured
264	Mamertines of Messana appeal to Rome for aid against Carthage; Appius Claudius Caudex sent to assist Mamertines
264–241	first Punic war
242	institution of <i>praetor peregrinus</i>
241	via Aurelia begun
238–230	Roman campaigns in Liguria
238	Roman occupation of Sardinia

## Chronology

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- |         |   |
|---------|---|
| 231     | Roman embassy to Hamilcar in Spain and its alliance with Saguntum   |
| 227     | Roman agreement with Saguntum   |
| 226     | Roman treaty with Hasdrubal   |
| 223–222 | Gaius Flaminius and Marcus Claudius Marcellus defeat the Insubres   |
| 219     | Hannibal besieges and captures Saguntum   |
| 218     | war declared between Rome and Carthage; Hannibal invades Italy  |
| 216     | battle of Cannae  |
| 202     | battle of Zama; peace with Carthaginians on Roman terms   |
| 200–197 | second war with Macedonia, conquest of Spain  |
| 196     | freedom solemnly granted to Greeks at the Isthmian Games  |
| 192–188 | war between Syria and Rome and peace of Apamea  |
| 187     | construction of via Flaminia and via Aemilia; criminal prosecution of Lucius Cornelius Scipio Asiaticus         |
| 186     | suppression of the “Bacchanalian Conspiracy”  |
| 184     | ensorship of Marcus Porcius Cato  |
| 180     | <i>lex Villia annalis</i>   |
| 173     | Rome expels Latini to repopulate the Latin cities   |
| 171–168 | third Macedonian war and conclusive victory of Romans   |
| 167     | Macedonia divided into four and Illyria into three separate republics; Romans exempted from direct taxes        |
| 155     | conquest of Cisalpine Liguria completed   |
| 149     | <i>lex Calpurnia de repetundis</i>  |
| 149–146 | third Punic war and destruction of Carthage   |
| 136     | slave rebellion in Sicily   |
| 133     | tribunate of Tiberius Gracchus; Scipio Aemilianus ends the Celtiberian war by capturing and destroying Numantia |
| 123–122 | first and second tribunes of Gaius Gracchus   |
| 121     | <i>senatus consultum ultimum</i> against Gaius Gracchus and his death   |
| 120     | creation of the province of Gallia Narbonensis  |
| 119     | <i>lex Thoria agraria</i> ending the work of agrarian commission  |
| 111–105 | Jugurthine war  |
| 107     | Marius takes command against Jugurtha   |

xvi	<i>Chronology</i>
104	Marius' campaigns against Cimbri; second Sicilian slave war
102	Marius' victory over the Teutones at Aquae Sextiae
100	second tribunate of Saturninus
91	tribunate of Livius Drusus and his assassination; beginning of the Social War
90–89	<i>leges Iulia de civitate danda, Plautia Papiria, Pompeia de Transpadanis</i>
88–85	first Mithridatic war under Sulla's command
86	463,000 citizens on the census
82–80	full powers granted to Sulla, <i>dictator rei publicae constituendae</i> ; proscriptions of many Roman citizens; Sulla's reforms of republican institutions
77	Marius' ally Sertorius in control of Spain
73	slave revolt in southern Italy under Spartacus
73–71	Verres governor of Sicily
72	assassination of Sertorius
70	910,000 citizens on the census
67	<i>lex Gabinia</i> granting <i>imperium</i> to Pompey against pirates
63–62	Catilinarian conspiracy and death of Catiline
60	first triumvirate of Pompey, Crassus, and Caesar
57	beginning of Caesar's campaigns and victories in Gaul and Britain
55	second triumvirate of Pompey, Crassus, and Caesar
53	defeat and death of Crassus in his campaign against Parthians
52	death of Clodius
49	Caesar crosses the Rubicon, the consuls and Pompey leave Italy
48	Caesar's victory at Pharsalus over Pompey, death of Pompey
46–44	government of Julius Caesar, <i>dictator perpetuus</i>
44	assassination of Julius Caesar
43	<i>lex Titia</i> establishes the triumvirate of Marcus Antonius, Octavian, and Lepidus
42	deification of Julius Caesar; battle of Philippi and suicides of Brutus and Cassius
38	renewal of triumviral powers for five years
36	removal of Lepidus from the triumvirate

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- 32 divorce of Octavia by Antony; publication of Antony's will by Octavian; personal oath of loyalty sworn to Octavian in the towns of Italy and the west
- 31 battle of Actium
- 30 capture of Alexandria, suicides of Antony and Cleopatra
- 28 Octavian and Agrippa share the consular *imperium*; Octavian becomes *princeps senatus*
- 27 Octavian appears before senate and resigns his exceptional powers, receives proconsular *imperium* for ten years, and is given the name Augustus
- 23 serious illness of Augustus, he resigns the consulship and receives *imperium maius proconsulare* and *tribunicia potestas* for life; Maecenas falls out of favor in the imperial court
- 21 marriage of Agrippa and Julia
- 18–17 Augustus' legislation on criminal and family matters; reform of civil and private judicial procedures
- 17 Augustus adopts his grandsons Gaius and Lucius, the children of Agrippa and Julia; composition of Horace's *Carmen Saeculare*
- 12 death of Agrippa
- 11 marriage of Livia's son Tiberius with Julia
- AD
- 4 Augustus adopts Agrippa Postumus and Tiberius, who adopts Germanicus
- 6 outbreak of revolt in Pannonia and Illyricum
- 9 end of Pannonian revolt; defeat of Publius Quinctilius Varro and loss of three legions in the Teutoburg Forest
- 12 Germanicus takes command in Gaul and Germany
- 14 death of Augustus, Tiberius becomes *princeps*
- 16 Germanicus recalled from Germany by Tiberius
- 31 Sejanus' fall as *praefectus praetorio* and his death
- 37 Tiberius' death; Germanicus' son, Caligula, acclaimed *princeps*
- 41 murder of Caligula and proclamation of Claudius; beginning of the construction of a new harbor at Ostia
- 43 conquest of Britannia

xviii	<i>Chronology</i>
49	extension of the <i>pomerium</i> of Rome
50	Claudius adopts Nero
54	death of Claudius, accession of Nero
67	Vespasian appointed as legate in command of the war in Judaea
68	death of Nero, proclamation of Galba as <i>princeps</i>
69	praetorians proclaim Otho <i>princeps</i> ; murder of Galba; Otho defeated by Vitellius' German legions and commits suicide; Vitellius granted imperial powers by senate; murder of Vitellius by Antonius Primus; Vespasian proclaimed emperor by the army in Syria and Judaea
70	publication of the <i>lex de Imperio Vespasiani</i> ; Vespasian's son, Titus, captures Jerusalem, destruction of the Temple
79	death of Vespasian and accession of Titus
81	death of Titus and accession to imperial power of his brother Domitian
96	assassination of Domitian and accession of Nerva
98–117	reign of Trajan after the death of Nerva; conquest of Dacia and Parthia
117–38	reign of Hadrian
138–61	reign of Antoninus Pius, adopted by his predecessor
161–80	reign of Marcus Aurelius
165	the “Antonine plague” begins
166	appointment of senatorial <i>juridici</i> for Italy
177	Commodus, son of Marcus Aurelius, co-emperor
180–92	Commodus sole emperor
193–211	accession and reign of Septimius Severus following civil war
211–17	accession of Septimius' son, Caracalla
212	<i>Constitutio Antoniniana</i> ; Caracalla's brother, Geta, and Papinian, <i>praefectus praetorio</i> , murdered
235	murder of Severus Alexander, the last emperor of the Severan dynasty
235–68	political and military crisis of the empire
270–5	reign of Aurelian
276–82	reign of Valerius Probus
284–305	reign of Diocletian and Tetrarchy (from 293); restoration of imperial power and large-scale administrative, financial, and military reforms
303–12	persecution of Christians
306	Constantine declared emperor in the west



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312	defeat of Maxentius at the battle of the Milvian Bridge
313	toleration for all religions (“Edict of Milan”)
337	death of Constantine
438–9	<i>Codex Theodosianus</i>
476	Romulus Augustulus, the last emperor of the <i>pars Occidentis</i>
500	<i>Edictum Theoderici</i>
527–65	Justinian’s empire
529	<i>Codex Iustiniani</i>
533	<i>Digesta</i>

## *Introduction*

This book is not primarily a political history of Rome in which a factual reconstruction and an account of struggles for power, and among powers, form the very fabric of the narrative; nor is it a social and economic history. I am mainly concerned with the collective norms and regulations that went into building Rome's institutional architecture.

The Continental – especially German and Italian – tradition of legal historiography abounds in studies on Roman public law or *Staatsrecht*, starting with Mommsen's masterpiece, whose influence can still be felt in all of our work. If I have ventured to add yet another volume to an already copious literature, however, it is because of my growing dissatisfaction with much of this scholarship. The formalism typical of our disciplines, including the history of the law, has very deep roots, and has lent the tradition the weight of scientific authority. A large number of important works have come out of this tradition that seek to describe and analyze in detail the countless component parts of the complex machine that was Roman law. Such works, however, seem less interested in examining how this machine functioned concretely. In short, they are unable – to use a well-known image by a great nineteenth-century Roman historian, Rudolf von Jhering – to move beyond a system's anatomy to the study of its physiology. In my experience of modern legal historiography, I have encountered impressive reconstructions that have had a lasting impact on the field, but which basically propose models that could not have worked in practice, making them of little use for an understanding of the way in which such a society operated.

At a time when continental legal science is moving beyond this traditional, heavily formalist approach, the fact that historians of the law are still engaging in this kind of analysis is evidence of their tendency to find more interest in the procedures themselves rather than the purposes for which they were conceived. This makes their work less and less relevant to the complexity of a rapidly changing world and the enormous challenges now

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faced by positive jurists. But their approach also distances them from the questions other historians are now asking about ancient societies, which have inevitably come to focus more on how these functioned rather than on issues of structure and definition. A system that seeks only to define and classify our knowledge of ancient institutions ends up reinforcing the conviction – not infrequently expressed quite openly even in the most reputable scholarship – that the legal sphere is irrelevant or only marginal to our understanding of a society such as Rome's, despite the fact that the Romans developed and used the law systematically and intensively.

In response to this situation, my work has gradually taken a different turn, a change exemplified most clearly in this book, where I have employed a new approach, at the cost, inevitably, of simplifying the vast quantity of material it addresses. This is the price to be paid in order to produce a text that can be read rather than merely consulted, allowing the reader more direct access to what I consider its central subject. In this book I have tried to clarify – not least for my own benefit – how the Roman system actually worked in practice. I hope I have succeeded in providing both a clear and a plausible reconstruction of how Rome's legal mechanisms, formal rules, and institutional structures emerged out of a specific social context, serving to regulate it, as well as in examining how and why they evolved. My primary objective has been to relate these elements to each other, a focus that has necessarily entailed sacrificing some descriptive detail.

By dwelling on the constantly renewed tension between formal institutions and rules on the one hand, and competing forces and interests on the other, I have tried to capture the dynamic element of the Roman constitution, in which “the legal” was constantly being reshaped and redefined. Undoubtedly, working from the vantage point of a “constitution in the making,” as opposed to describing a set of norms defined once and for all, means that this book approximates more closely the way British jurists and political theorists have examined and discussed their institutions rather than the scholarship on constitutional law typical of the Continental tradition – a fairly obvious choice, since the Romans never dreamed of creating a definitive constitutional charter, much less of setting it down in writing.

This focus on the relationship between legal forms and political events also responds to a growing sensitivity to the “role of personalities in history” which in its youth my generation (especially in Continental Europe) so often sacrificed to a vision of impersonal forces operating autonomously and according to inherent necessity. Indeed, it is not only in political and other historical events that we can see the connection between larger underlying shifts, pertaining primarily to the structure of society, and the

impact made by individual personalities on key events. Rome's institutional development seems to replicate this pattern as well, and, as one might expect, this is most apparent at those times when Rome's legal or political institutions underwent particular or more pronounced changes. The history of the city "in the making" and the arc traced by the imperial republic is marked by a number of strong, if not exceptional, personalities who guided Rome's policy, shaping its institutions and contributing significantly to their development.

I have been highly selective in my choice of facts, with a view to stressing the nodal points in a long stretch of history, but I have sought to combine this selectiveness with another aim: that of helping the reader fully grasp the extraordinary complexity of the processes under consideration, where only seldom can we discern a confluence of forces and policies clearly pointing in one direction, without contradictions or ambiguities. These somewhat conflicting objectives have inevitably entailed making some subjective choices, and the results are of course debatable. I leave it to other scholars in the field to assess their validity and decide to what extent I have succeeded in sketching the essential outlines of the history of a whole system of power and government in a reasonably plausible way, and without oversimplifying or trivializing it.

The title of the book reflects its basic interpretive framework: power and the law are the two reference points whose complex interaction shaped the history of Rome. If I sometimes appear to overemphasize the divergence between the two, it is purely to avoid falling back into a conceptual cage from which we are only now breaking free, and which tended to conflate these categories. It is a cage largely constructed of concepts drawn from contexts alien to the Roman experience, such as "the state" or a "constitution." In this respect, it is important to point out how far we have shifted from Mommsen's perspective – a shift that started in the past century – and from the framework of modern statehood that was so central to his interpretation.

In accordance with this approach, I have thought it best to avoid referring to these concepts, and also tread carefully around another key term widely used by historians of classical antiquity: that of the "city-state," a seemingly innocuous and purely descriptive nineteenth-century coinage that is in fact quite otherwise. For the increasing reliance of contemporary historians and political scientists on this interpretive tool has, through apparently objective references and analogies that strike me as somewhat arbitrary, insensibly fostered interpretations of ancient societies that have strong ideological implications. This confirms, once again, how our work as historians of the

ancient world has always been informed by values relating to the present. To some extent this is unavoidable, but we must steer clear of the kind of historiographical naïveté that all too easily perpetuates, while masking it, a tendency to employ standard hermeneutic categories which flatten the past, crushing it under the weight of our contemporary reality, and colonizing it with our assumptions and frameworks. The danger here is that we lose the ability to perceive the past's very real difference, dissolving it into an eternal present.

It is well known that the Romans did not have a word to refer to their political system comparable to the one so familiar to us: “the state.” This term cannot remotely convey the meaning of their usual terminology – *res publica*, *populus*, *civitas* – because it is the result of a slow process of elaboration that did not begin before the late Middle Ages. Unsurprisingly, the words the Romans used are based on a notion of community that lacks that pronounced separation between rulers and ruled which underlies our idea of the state.

A better choice would be “commonwealth,” which I find more suited to the Latin *res publica* than “state,” evoking the complex and elusive combination of communitarian aspects with a hierarchical structuring of the social order, and which brings up another and even more elusive feature of the Roman experience. I am referring to the singularly ambivalent process that enabled the parallel and synchronic development of forms of political domination (as the city's identity became consolidated) together with broader processes of circulation and integration. This speaks to Rome's unique open character, even in its first incarnation as a “city-state,” and to the fact that it so early moved beyond the rigid separation between those “inside” and those “outside” the community, thus creating the preconditions for a process of transformation of its legal institutions that would eventually lead to universal empire.

Thinking in terms of the communitarian character of Rome's formation is also useful, however, to gain a better understanding of a central feature of Roman law, whose earliest core, like many of its later developments, appears to have evolved independently of the city's governing institutions – its organs of sovereignty. It will be easier for English-speaking readers to grasp this concept than for Continental ones, who have until recently been held captive by the wholly modern concept of the sovereign's legislative monopoly. This idea was utterly alien to the Roman experience, as it was to medieval and modern Europe before the eighteenth century.

This is one of the reasons why I dwell at some length on the nebulous origins of the city. It is true that the sources for this period are relatively

scarce and unclear, steeped in legend and combining references to the myth of Rome's foundation with distant echoes of events that are inexplicable to us, as they were even to the ancient authors who later recorded them. But it is also true that in these origins we find the seeds of those elements that would remain central to Rome's subsequent history: the importance of its formal customs – the *mores* – and the innovative and creative autonomy of the interpreters of Rome's legal heritage.

Even later, and for a long time, the Romans did not seek to attribute the entirety of their legal heritage to the *res publica*, basing the former's legitimacy on the latter. To be sure, the city adopted new regulations and developed new law, and its judicial magistrates defined new legal constraints, remedies, and procedures in their edicts, but the original kernel of the *ius civile*, which had a foundational value for the new political community, preexisted it. This original kernel, dating from “pre-civic” times, was already a sedimented, shared heritage by the time the city came into being as a single entity.

As for the republic's political organization, a number of things seem to confirm the remoteness of the Roman model from our own paradigms, which since the Middle Ages have tended to define political systems in terms of a unitary hierarchical order. The Roman republic, however, seems to have evolved a balance characterized primarily by the overlap and substantial competition between institutions. In short, the mutual controls and negotiations in Rome's political life were primarily marked by a confusion among the roles of the various power-bearing agents in the city. It is not possible to identify the distinct components of an abstract, unitary sovereignty, each associated with a different body and reflecting a system based on the balance of separate powers. On the contrary, what we see is rather a tension, and an unstable equilibrium, owing to the complex multiplicity of functions carried out by various co-holders of power, whose roles sometimes overlapped, and who had to cooperate and control each other's actions internally, without reference to any external framework.

This equilibrium would long remain a function of the *res publica's* aristocratic structure, which would survive into the late principate, helping to shape Rome's expansionist policy. The aristocracy's dominance was linked to its control of the sectors most vital to Rome's power: the military and politics. But also of the science of the law, since I believe that the monopoly over legal knowledge that the senatorial aristocracy held for so long was certainly enabled, if not produced, by its awareness that gaining mastery of legal techniques and the workings of institutional mechanisms was essential to handling and preserving power. It is one of the great

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innovations introduced by the Romans: Rome and its *nobilitas* did not, of course, invent the law, but they did valorize, perhaps like no other ancient society, all those techniques of mediation and social – and political – dominance that this tool afforded, effecting a new soldering of “power” and “the law.” In this way they created, perhaps for the first time, a rational and “scientific” *modus operandi* for the definition, interpretation, and application of legal rules.

In this respect as well, our “statist” assumptions, and the crucial role played by the law in the history of modern political systems, seem to be inadequate hermeneutical tools for reconstructing the history of Rome. For the work of *interpretatio* conducted by Roman legal “experts” and “specialists” was for centuries legitimized by nothing more than the personal prestige and the social status of an aristocratic hierarchy. Clearly, in any social order the interpretation of the law has a creative dimension, allowing it to flourish and develop further; but in what state-centered system where the law is identified with the “command of the sovereign” would we witness such a clear expression of the idea that the legal system was also the product of the personal opinions of private citizens such as Rome’s *iuris prudentes*? It was almost as if it were an unquestioned assumption, even at the height of the empire, and of the centralized political control that went with it, that jurists were an authoritative source of law.

In the course of the book the reader will have occasion to note my avoidance of a certain modern tendency to interpret the political life and institutions of the republican age in terms of our notions of “democracy” – once again raising the age-old, never-ending debate on “the liberty of the ancients and the moderns.” This book is not a treatise of political theory or a history of modern constitutionalism, nor is it specifically concerned with ancient political thought, although it must of course be borne in mind. My historiographical interpretation, with its strong insistence on the persistent aristocratic and hierarchical character of Roman society, is informed by a conscious decision to exclude from my set of analytical tools the notion of “the state,” as mentioned above. For the modern political categories that revolve around the two concepts of “liberty” and “democracy,” and the concrete actualization of such values in the Western political experience, emerged within a new frame of reference centered on the nation-state. Naturally, the non-existence of this key concept in the theoretical universe of the ancients also means that ideas of freedom, as well as the particular physiognomy of certain forms of democracy or popular political participation, which were indeed significant in the Roman experience, were nevertheless configured in a thoroughly different way from our own.

The tension between Roman power and the law is perhaps even more striking where Rome's expansionist policy is concerned. For centuries, the vertiginous increase in the power wielded from Rome's imperial center was accompanied by a singular process of fragmentation – indeed, near-dissolution – of the *civitas Romana* as a result of the proliferation of personal and legal status categories that Rome devised as it created its *municipia* and founded its colonies. Such arrangements ensured the loyalty and dependence of this polymorphous constellation of communities, but they also postponed, and gradually worsened, a root problem: that of the growing inability of the great political instrument invented by classical antiquity – the “city” – to keep pace with the expansion of its power.

We can see here the irreconcilable contradiction at the heart of the city. The immense obstacles standing in the way of granting full citizenship to all Italians were not only due to the self-interested and egotistical impulses that put a stop to Rome's long-standing liberality in granting its citizenship – and which led to the downfall of Gaius Gracchus and then Drusus, and eventually to the Social War. What most weighed in the balance were the inherent limits of the original political edifice erected in classical antiquity, when the city was a sovereign and self-sufficient entity. The excessive “quantitative” growth of a city, as occurred with Rome, threatened the very nature of this model, which was based on the direct participation of the whole community of citizens in the political process. This problem was certainly not solved by the measures that the Roman ruling class was finally forced to adopt after the Social War. On the contrary, one can argue that granting Roman citizenship to all Italians further contributed to the irreversible legitimacy crisis of the *ancien régime*. The *civitas* now was at risk of dissolving into a new, but as yet “unfinished” Italy.

Although patron–client ties, hierarchical relationships, and institutional loyalties continued to ensure that the new *civitas* retained some degree of internal cohesion, the city-centered structure of the old political system was clearly inadequate to the task of governing an empire. All the more so since the formidable war machine the Romans had been building at least from the time of the Hannibalic wars, and which had allowed them to acquire an empire with relative ease, had now become an exorbitant burden, putting added strain on the political balance within the city. Here I have sought to move beyond the customary, and correct, account of the new political centrality of military commanders whose powers were conferred independently of the *cursus honorum*, and which overlapped with the powers of the city's institutions (and especially the senate), in order to examine more closely the nature of the tension between *optimates*



and *populares* that lasted throughout the last century of the republic. In my view, this tension was due to the fact that Rome's political system was now held hostage by its military success. It was not only that Rome's imperialist drive exerted a stranglehold on the political process in the late republic, when it seemed that popular pressure, rather than the senate's decisions, lay behind the granting of extraordinary powers and the creation of new military commands for overseas expeditions. The problem was, rather, that the massive growth of the Roman military machine itself stood in the way of the stable exercise of power in the Mediterranean basin, not least because much of its cost was shifted outside, onto the conquered populations.

It was owing to Octavian Augustus that the long crisis of the late republican period eventuated in an original compromise between emergent needs and aspirations, and traditional interests and values. The terms of this compromise would be constantly redefined, but it did produce a more balanced relationship between Rome's central power and the societies it governed. This would last a long time, shaping Rome's subsequent history. Here I have tried to highlight the blend of old and new elements through which the world of the *poleis* and an entire ancient civilization were ushered into the wider imperial context.

The innumerable pages written by historians and jurists in an attempt to identify the formal features of Augustus' principate, and their unsatisfactory results, attest to the impossibility of describing it in strictly formal and legalistic terms – those so beloved by the Romans themselves. For the seemingly indeterminate quality of Augustus' new construction is due to the fact that it preserved the singular separation between power and the law that was such an essential feature of the republic. And it was this, in turn, that made it possible to transfer the social and political culture of the “city-states” into another, new dimension, bypassing all the “supra-city” political models available at the time – Egypt under the pharaohs, or the Persian empire, or the Hellenistic kingdoms.

Without becoming enmeshed in the many twentieth-century debates on the topic, I rely largely on Mommsen's old interpretation here, while stopping short of adhering too closely to his notion of a senate-*princeps* diarchy: this relationship was certainly not a formal system set in place once and for all, but only the foundation for a lasting but constantly modified political compromise. My interpretation stresses how new layers of special powers and ad hoc functions were gradually inserted within the traditional republican system, with a view to resolving issues left unaddressed by the ordinary republican institutions. In time, these new offices became permanent, contributing to the dissolution of the old order. Most striking