



The Roman Republic

Michael Hewson Crawford

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Between the Sack of Rome by the Gauls in 390 BC and the middle of the second century BC, a part-time army of Roman peasants, under the leadership of the ruling oligarchy, conquered first Italy and then the whole of the Mediterranean. The loyalty of these marauding heroes, and of the Roman population as a whole, to their leaders was assured by a share in the rewards of victory, rewards which became steadily less accessible as the empire expanded - promoting a decline in loyalty of cataclysmic proportions. Wars, rural impoverishments, civil discord and slavery are a few of the subjects covered in this study.

The Roman Republic Details

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Matt says

Pretty easy read with a lot of information stuffed into a very short book. If you are interested in the time period and don't really know anything but want to it gives you a nice conceptual framework.

Zachary Taylor says

The Fontana History of the Ancient World series consistently delivers accessible historical overviews that delve deeper into the social, political, and economic trends of classical antiquity than most popular historical narratives. Written by renowned scholars like F. W. Walbank, Michael Crawford, and Colin Wells, the books in the series introduce readers to an alternative to Great Men history—ever so present in classical studies—and choose to focus more on critical historical analysis than various names and dates. Ideally, these books should supplement further texts with more information on the famous characters from the ancient world in order that one better understand the historical context in which these cultural trends took place.

In this short volume, Michael Crawford critically examines the sociopolitical rise and collapse of the Roman Republic over its five hundred year history. He adopts a decidedly Marxist approach: “I continue to believe that the principal reason for the destruction of Republican government at Rome was the neglect of the legitimate grievances of the population by the governing classes, just as I continue to believe that a socialist framework offers the only eventual hope for the survival of our own world” (vi). He expands on this claim later as well: “The collective rule of the mature Republican aristocracy only eventually dissolved in the last century BC when it failed to attend to the increasingly serious grievances of the poor and when individual members of the aristocracy appealed to those lower orders for support in their competition with each other” (25).

Crawford uses this social lens to critically assess almost every aspect of the Republic, including its political institutions, military practices, and cultural values. Still, he is keen to note that “the struggle of the Orders . . . was in no sense whatever a class struggle; the plebeian leadership was rich and ambitious and part of its support came not only from those in whose interest it was to support it, but from its clients at every economic level.” Likewise, “the patricians were similarly supported by all their clients, the humble amongst them perhaps acting against the economic interests of their class, but nonetheless bound to their patrons by real ties of shared sentiment and mutual advantage” (28). Crawford also importantly documents the impact of Greek culture on this divide between rich and poor: “The assimilation of Greek culture was one of the factors in the escalation of competition within the aristocracy, its possession functioning as one of the things which distanced some men from their peers, its skills ready to hand to serve the ends of political competition” (84). Crawford sums it all up quite nicely: “A part-time peasant army conquered the Mediterranean; that conquest then facilitated its destitution” (104).

The book is divided into fifteen relatively short chapters arranged for the most part chronologically. Crawford dedicates much time to the consequences of Rome’s Mediterranean empire on the governing classes and the governed, pointing out the Roman oligarchy’s move away from innovative solutions toward stilted conservatism in its attempt to preserve power and wealth for its members. Four helpful appendices, in which Crawford outlines the organization and responsibilities of the Roman assemblies, examines the social makeup of the Roman army, discusses the evolution of the class of equestrians, and questions the dubious constitutionality of the special commands bestowed on the likes of Pompeius, follow the text itself. Crawford also kindly includes an extensive ‘Further Reading’ section that can be plumbed successfully for more

detailed analyses of the sociopolitical trends discussed throughout the book.

When coupled with a robust volume filled with plenty of names and dates, Crawford's "interpretive essay" (v) offers an excellent account of the Roman Republic, especially in its middle years. Crawford masterfully handles the tribunes and revolutionary reforms of the Gracchi, paying particular attention to the real problems faced by the poor at Rome and in the Italian countryside who often did not have enough to participate in the political life of the city or even support a family. With nowhere else to turn, Rome's poor accepted the offer made to them by Rome's competitive aristocrats: in exchange for their loyalty they were promised a plot of land on which they could live comfortably. Ultimately, "the *proletarius*, who had hoped for land from the Gracchan legislation, was now encouraged to join the army; armed again at public expense, he no longer watched over the walls and the city and the forum, but over his own interest" (126). Such a development facilitated the anarchic collapse of the Roman Republic.

Matt says

When you think of "the Roman Republic," you might think about the period in which Rome came to dominate the Mediterranean, conquering Carthage, Greece, and parts of Asia. Or you might think about a set of institutions, i.e. the republican government that ruled Rome: consuls, senators, tribunes, etc. This book attempts to reveal both the history and the institutions of Rome in a slim volume. It is sometimes rather dense or fast-paced, skipping over all but the names and dates of important military events. Still, it is an important book because it shows how things got done at Rome. Other books can cover the battles and the strategies, this is a study of how one city-state came to control a mass of people and how the people it controlled came to alter the institutions that ruled them.

The book doesn't focus too heavily on the old *optimates* vs. *populares* model of Roman politics, but it does admit the important role played by the moneyed oligarchy and how that oligarchy's attempts to hold power eventually lead to the rise of military dynasts. Throughout the book, you will find black and white charts, graphs, and images of artifacts to help illustrate the historical narrative. Perhaps most helpful of all are the four short appendices which discuss the various assemblies (i.e. *comitia curiata*, *comitia centuriata*, *concilium plebis*, and *comitia tributa*), the arrangement of the army, *equites* and the special commands granted in the late Republic. These are all very informative, and I think I will be referring back to them. The age of this book (almost 40 years) means that some of its claims may be dated or superseded by new scholarship, but much of it is still valuable and insightful.

Al says

I was not overly fond of this book. I had high hopes for this work because Crawford is also a specialist in Republican coinage, and his numismatic works are first rate. Crawford gives a cursory tour of the Republic, with most of his emphasis on the Gracchi tribunes, which he refers to in many of the earlier chapters, before reaching the period in question. In early chapters, he refers to later events without more detail on the chronology, and in later chapters he jumps from transformative event to event with no real analysis or consistency. He also only lightly covers how the government was structured, which significantly impacted the development of empire. That was my biggest frustration; I'm familiar with the chronology, but the book is structured very loosely on chronology and not very well structured thematically, either. This left significant gaps in what is supposed to be a history of the Roman Republic. I was surprised that little space

was spent on the Punic Wars, which were defining events for Rome, especially the Second Punic War. Crawford also bemoans the lack of sources, or their reliability, throughout the book. The book's strength lies in Crawford's description of the relations between the Roman oligarchy and the lower classes, but even this was not fully developed, and was a one-sided examination, at best. The book is too analytical for a general reader and not well organized or detailed enough for the historian/classicist.

bkwurm says

Very brief overview of the events and developments that led to the fall of the Roman Republic. Because it is a thin book, it covers the political and social tensions very broadly. The personal motivations of the personalities are barely touched on, which given those personalities, Scipio, Cato, The Gracchi, Marius, Sulla, Pompeius, Cicero, Caesar, Clodius, etc, ia a waste.

But as an introduction to the manifold reasons for the fall of the Republic, it serves its purpose.

Olivia says

Had to read this for a class. In some ways I really liked it. I was certainly impressed with how much research evidently went into this book. At the same time while some things really stuck out because they interested me, I felt generally the book was too compressed. It was pretty easy to read once you get into it, but I think he definitely could have expanded more. It was less than two hundred pages!

E W says

The most generous word I can use to describe this book is slog. I got it from the library hoping it would be a concise overview of the Roman Republic, in which I am woefully deficient of knowledge. Sadly, it failed to do that for me. The timelines are not well established though yes, everything is presented in chronological order and events are presented but not well moored in any context of why they happened other than the aristocracy was bad to their peasants and Rome was mean to everyone. In short, not recommended for the casual reader looking for a basic history, nor deep enough for those already familiar with the events covered; in short, I don't know what audience would gain something from this work.

Billy says

A brief easy-to-read history of the Roman Republic that focuses mainly on iis political institutions. Unfortunately, it doesn't do a good job of explaining the basics of Roman life or history, so you'll have to come to this book having already read up on them. In the end, this book just didn't really seem to hit the mark.

Lauren Albert says

A 2 1/2 really. I found it confused--names mentioned without explanation, terms used but undefined. I always assume that I missed something but was not helped by the indexes (yes, plural) since they were very poorly done. Not once did I find something I was looking for there. As an example, Crawford refers to "Latins," "Romans" and "Italians" without explanation. Presumably, "Italians" are simply non-Roman Italians. Perhaps "Latins" were people from the Latin League but then, how did they differ from "Italians"? A good index would have helped.

It was at first good to continue on from the history of Greece I just finished to this--seeing Greece from a different perspective. But then, Crawford lost me. I just started on The Roman Empire which is by Colin Wells and so hopefully more clearly written.

Caracalla says

This is pretty technical stuff but I think Crawford's judgments are often very subtle and interesting. It's certainly sold me on Roman history, very, very complex and interesting socio-cultural, political and economic dynamics are all involved here as compared to other stuff I've been reading about, 5th century Greek poleis and the pre-Mughal Hindu regal dynasties of India. I like the way the Romans often seemed to have solutions to problems that the Greeks never solved like class schism and stable empire, a sense of progress maybe although all literary output pales in comparison to the Greek stuff even Tacitus and Virgil. There's also more source material available which can always add interest. The prose is great and characterized by concision and lapidary clarity. The book is somewhat harmed by its compression of this history. It goes from the earliest Samnite wars to Caesar's assassination and considering the wealth of source material that could be discussed, a lot has to be left out. The analytical focus of this book is much to be preferred to a narrative approach but perhaps the compression makes it difficult for Crawford to make his main contentions clear as consistent themes (he refers you back to things he said earlier a lot just by page numbers and this is pretty cumbersome particularly when it's not made clear how what he's saying currently corresponds to what is said on the page you're sent back to).
