Roman History

Let's begin at the beginning, with a book by Jeremy Armstrong that takes us back to the Early Republic, from the sixth to fourth centuries BCE, examining the social and political transformations of that period and looking at the very foundation of the Roman state.[1] The challenges of working on this early period are well known. Indeed, Armstrong early on says that he will eschew an overly optimistic, positivistic approach to the later literary account and make use of the substantial archaeological evidence. This archaeological evidence is crucial in drawing up a picture of the social and economic context of early Latium. However, the problematic literary accounts still often appear as rather too unproblematic framing narratives for what follows. Armstrong's account is chronological, taking us, as the title suggests, from the early 'warlords' to the military society of the Republic in the wake of the Latin Settlement in 338 BCE. What we have here is a properly ambitious attempt to explain this crucial transition – but many problems and questions undoubtedly remain in the study of the early days of the Republic.[2]

Moving from the beginning to end of the Roman Republic, we come to the legacy of Ronald Syme. Syme was still active as a scholar even up to his death at the age of eighty-six, when he left behind a large body of unpublished work. While much of this material has already been published, thanks largely to Antony Birley and Fergus Millar, this new volume contains twenty-six further pieces, thanks this time to the labours of Federico Santangelo, mostly in the Syme Archive in Oxford.[3] Santangelo's Introduction provides the nugget that Syme's working method involved cigar boxes, in which he stored many small slips of paper, organized thematically. The essays themselves generally provide examples of Syme's typically forensic approach to particular historical problems. The final contribution, however, represents part of an unfinished book on Rome and Umbria.

A different kind of Roman revolution from that studied by Syme was undoubtedly carried out by the emperor Constantine. In the wake of his big anniversary, a rash of books on Constantine appeared, but it seems that the subject is far from exhausted. Noel Lenski approaches Constantine with the theme of reception in mind – not just how we see him, but how he was received by different audiences in different contexts in his own time.[4] The cities of the title are key because Lenski examines the modelling of different 'Constantines' through the crucial 'petition and response' system of Roman imperial administration and communication, in which the cities were of course central. To a large degree, nonetheless, this is a book about the emperor and religion, and

[1] *War and Society in Early Rome. From Warlord to Generals*. By Jeremy Armstrong. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xiv + 317. 10 illustrations, 3 maps. Hardback £64.99, ISBN: 978-1-107-09357-7.

[2] Note, too, that the same author has also just published a more 'popular' but related book: *Early Roman Warfare. From the Regal Period to the First Punic War*. By Jeremy Armstrong. Barnsley, Pen and Sword Books Ltd, 2016. Pp. xvi + 176. Hardback £19.99, ISBN: 978-1-78159-254-0.

[3] *Approaching the Roman Revolution. Papers on Republican History*. By Sir Ronald Syme, edited by Federico Santangelo. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xv + 428. Hardback £90, ISBN: 978-0-19-87670-6.

[4] *Constantine and the Cities. Imperial Authority and Civic Politics*. By Noel Lenski. Empire and After. Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. Pp. 416. Hardback £69, ISBN: 978-0-8122-4777-0.

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Lenski also hereby examines Constantine's shifting religious politics, carefully enunciating local contexts, including cases from Spello in Umbria to Maiouma in Palestine. He shows how, in his interactions with cities, Constantine cleverly exploited local rivalries and issues, all the while aiming to gain not just new clients but new adherents to Christianity. In the final chapters this focus on Constantine and the church becomes particularly strong and we see how, although the emperor generally favoured a non-coercive approach, force and violence were also part of the story; as historians, we know that this would set a telling (and indeed fatal) precedent. This is a serious and careful book which provides some welcome new angles on a familiar figure and will be read with great interest by Constantine aficionados and haters alike.

Next, the importance of Roman law as a subject can scarcely be overestimated, but it is, nonetheless, often hard for non-specialists to approach. The *Oxford Handbook*[5] is a clear gift to Roman historians in need of a guiding hand, and its commitment to analysing Roman legal theory and practice in terms of its historical contextualization is very welcome. This concern explains the book's title: it is specifically with the relationship between law and society, a relationship that can be fruitfully examined through a range of approaches: historical, sociological, and anthropological, as well as in terms of legal theory. Different sections of the handbook deal with the sources of Roman law (Part II), the (broadly speaking) constitutional structure of the Roman state (Part III), law as a profession and as a culture (Part IV), the role of law in settling disputes of different kinds (Part V), how different types of persons used and were treated by the law (Part VI), law and the family, property and economics (Part VII). As will be clear, this is quite an undertaking, and it makes for a large book, obviously one to be dipped into, rather than read from start to finish. The range of topics covered is enticing and it is good to see areas, categories, and indeed persons absent from past treatments receiving proper attention here: for instance, three chapters deal with gender, and children have a chapter of their own. The editors are to be praised for enticing such an impressive range of experts in their various fields to contribute and collaborate.

Legal sources are just one element of a notably wide range considered by André Tchernia in his book on Roman trade.[6] This is an English translation of the 2011 French original, and represents a welcome opportunity to bring the work of this important scholar to a wider audience. Rather than a traditional monograph, it represents a collection of revised essays. However, the essays collected in Part 1 (also called 'The Romans in Trade') are closely interconnected, so that the effect is definitely cumulative. Tchernia begins, with a nod to Horace (1.3, 21–4), with the traditional elite classical abhorrence of trade: 'Trade is an abomination: in violation of a decree by a wise god who wanted lands to be separated by water, it sends out impious ships across the seas' (3). And yet, despite this disapproval, the scale of long-distance commerce in the Roman Empire, especially the value of the luxury goods market, is breath-taking at times. A recently discovered Aramaic inscription from Palmyra gives the sum of goods arriving by caravan in Palmyra in one month as 350 million sesterces, around

[5] *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Law and Society*. Edited by Paul J. Du Plessis, Clifford Ando, and Kaius Tuori. Oxford Handbooks. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xvii + 728. Hardback £110, ISBN: 978-0-19-872868-9.

[6] *The Romans and Trade*. By André Tchernia. Oxford Studies on the Roman Economy. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xi + 380. Hardback £85, ISBN: 978-0-19-872371-4.

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one-third of the budget of the Roman state! Throughout, Tchernia deals expertly and lucidly with the paradoxes and complexities involved, shedding new light and adding nuance to old and new debates. One of the particular advantages of this study is how the actual people involved in Roman trade come to the fore. We see the activities of a number of families from across the Roman west – the most striking example being the involvement of the Peticii family from the Abruzzo. One member of the family left a rock-cut inscription in Wadi Hammmamat in Egypt; another (most likely) was commemorated on a funerary monument depicting a camel carrying amphorae. Tchernia's book shows the intersection of the local and the regional, and between state supply and freer markets, as well as the role of individuals of all types. It shows just how important the study of trade is to the broader study of the Roman economy, and indeed of the Roman Empire in general.

The wide-ranging economic connections demonstrated by Tchernia obviously also had far-reaching cultural, political, and social consequences. The next book takes us to the edge of the Roman Empire, to Dura Europus, once famously described by Rostovtzeff as 'the Pompeii of the Syrian desert'.[7] The volume is strongly interdisciplinary, with contributions from an international group of scholars focusing on different aspects and indeed periods of Dura's history, and dealing with a rich range of evidence, including papyri, epigraphic evidence (also comprising *dipinti* and graffiti), frescoes, sculpture, and a host of archaeological material including small finds. Several of the papers focus on religious life at Dura; others consider the history of the study of the site, including issues of conservation and preservation; and gender also gets a valuable look-in. Perhaps most striking, however, and running through many of the chapters, is the issue of cultural identity in this town on the periphery of the Graeco-Roman world. The first chapter indeed, that of Leonardo Gregoratti, looks at pre-Roman Dura in its Parthian context. Lucinda Dirven provides a careful deconstruction of the notion of 'Parthian art' in the town. Michael Sommer, meanwhile, provides a clear and cogent discussion of the issue of cultural identity at Dura, examining which methodological concepts and approaches are most useful to understand and describe cultural change and cultural identities there. After introducing such influential concepts as 'hybridity' and 'third space', Sommer looks at two short case studies: the case of the Jewish community as seen through the famous synagogue paintings, and the activity of women in legal documents, as preserved in papyri. Both studies show a variety of responses on behalf of those involved. The frescoes suggest impulses both to strongly assert a demarcated Jewish identity, and to suggest 'the potentiality of integration' (63). The legal documents, meanwhile, indicating a situation where the application of Roman legal paradigms was very weak, show how women could chose the legal institution that best suited their individual case. Therefore, when talking about cultural change at Dura Europus, rather than understanding 'Romanization' (or 'Hellenization'), or indeed talking about 'cultural veneers' or 'amnesia', we need to see the creation of 'completely new cultural paradigms' (66). Overall, while this volume, as often, claims to offer case studies rather than a comprehensive account, it does nonetheless make a

[7] *Religion, Society and Culture at Dura-Europos*. Edited by Ted Kaizer. Yale Classical Studies 38. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. Pp. xxii + 310. 54 illustrations. Hardback £64.99, ISBN: 978-1-107-12379-3.

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substantive and highly useful contribution to the field, with strong backing from excellent illustrations and detailed indexes.

Dura is, of course, famous for its unique survivals in terms of religious buildings and next we turn to an original and at times fascinating take on Roman religion.[8] Ailsa Hunt approaches the subject through a focus on sacred trees in this book, based on her PhD thesis. Her aim is to show that, while traditionally Roman religion has been understood as a religion of praxis, devoid of serious intellectual content, this is very much a misrepresentation. Sacred trees are not just examples of a crude, animistic 'paganism' but instead repay serious study for what they can tell us about how Roman religion was envisioned, and how it worked. An impressive array of different sources are analysed: literature of all genres, but also epigraphy and other visual and material depictions. The most striking visual examples are perhaps the fragments of furniture from the Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum: one relief depicts two winged boys in Phrygian hats gathering pine cones from a large tree, surely referencing Cybele and Attis; on the other, the pine tree is accompanied by a statue of Priapus, and a set of Pan's pipes. Here the images of the trees 'flesh out' the divine effectively and playfully. Across the texts, images, and objects studied, trees appear in different contexts, with different meanings and values, reminding us of the complexity of Roman religion.

In late antique Gaul, however, tree worship signified a backward and residual 'paganism' for our disapproving ecclesiastical witnesses. A super-observant reader might note that I wrote an approving back-jacket comment for Lisa Bailey's fascinating study of religious life in late antique Gaul.[9] This highly readable and engaging book takes a different approach from that of Ailsa Hunt, approaching the religious beliefs and praxes of a category that was entirely alien to traditional Roman religion: that of the laity. Bailey's starting point is that the laity of late antique Gaul deserve to have their voices heard, and this rich and fascinating account certainly bears this out. The diverse religious experiences of real people are brought to life convincingly. Bailey builds upon her knowledge of a vast range of different source material and up-to-date scholarship to produce a readable and insightful book. Different chapters consider 'environments' (churches and other spaces), 'urban case studies' (Arles, Lyons, Trier, and Tours), 'rituals' (where we see that ecclesiastical rituals do not always work exactly as the clergy envisaged), 'behaviours' (including a sensitive examination of the disjunction between clerical and lay outlooks), and 'knowledge and belief' (by way of conclusion). There are some delightful vignettes – such as peasants singing questionable songs in the (indulgent) earshot of Saint Radegund, and Gregory of Tours in search of a good fishing spot – but the book is a serious as well as an accessible one, and makes a welcome contribution to the study of late antique religion.

Late antique religion also comes under the microscope in Jacob Latham's study of the history of the *pompa circensis* in Rome, from the Republic into Late Antiquity.[10] This

[8] *Reviving Roman Religion. Sacred Trees in the Roman World*. By Ailsa Hunt. Cambridge Classical Studies. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xii + 333. 17 illustrations. Hardback £80, ISBN: 978-1-107-15354-7.

[9] *The Religious Worlds of the Laity in Late Antique Gaul*. By Lisa Kaaren Bailey. London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. Pp. viii + 247. Hardback £90, ISBN: 978-1-4725-1903-0.

[10] *Performance, Memory, and Processions in Ancient Rome. The Pompa Circensis from the Late Republic to Late Antiquity*. By Jacob A. Latham. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xxii + 345. 86 illustrations, 3 maps. Hardback £74.99, ISBN: 978-1-107-13071-5.

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is the first study of its kind – and indeed the challenges of such a history are clear: despite the importance and ubiquity of this procession in Roman culture, the historical sources are fleeting and difficult. Nonetheless, Latham has succeeded in teasing out from a wide range of often problematic evidence a fascinating picture of the shifting meanings that the procession held in Roman religion, culture, and ideology. He employs a deft touch with the often problematic literary material that purports to describe the festivities: his notion of 'history in the subjunctive' as he describes an ideal rather than a 'real' circus procession works well. He builds nicely on recent trends in urban history that look at the role of cultural memory, and at space and identity as demarcated by movement and ritual. The book also provides a nuanced contribution to the still-burgeoning scholarship on the cultural transformation of the city of Rome in Late Antiquity. As well as literary sources, there is a large quantity of numismatic material, which is effectively synthesized into the analysis, and the whole is elegantly written. As a scholar of late antique Rome I learned a great deal from this book and have no doubt that it will be widely read and appreciated by scholars with diverse interests in Roman history and religion.

Finally, Rome once more. If any more proof were needed, *Rome. An Urban History from Antiquity to the Present* makes a strong argument for studying the urban history of Rome over the seriously *longue durée*.[11] What the authors call an 'urban biography' takes the reader from the very beginning up to the present day. Ancient and late antique Rome are the focus of sixteen out of the thirty-five chapters. These chapters do a good job of leading us through the changes the city underwent at the same time as providing key themes in the study of the ancient *caput mundi*. However, it is actually the chapters dealing with the later urban history that this ancient historian found the most fascinating: Rome is a palimpsest but also a city that frequently proclaimed its rebirth and looked to its ancient origins in different ways, again and again. Ancient historians will certainly enrich their understanding of ancient Rome by learning more about its later reception and remaking in this way. We can trace the lives and afterlives of certain key objects and sites (such as the obelisk of Nero's circus, now the centre of Bernini's Piazza di San Pietro). We also follow the paths of certain key themes, notably a focus on spectacle, on the city as theatre (an important thread previously discussed with regard to Latham's book). Urban theatricality was employed highly effectively for political and ideological advantage by a succession of rulers: the emperors, Counter-Reformation popes, and Mussolini, for instance. This is a very humane account of Rome's urban story, however, and we are reminded that even seemingly all-powerful rulers could never mould the city entirely to their own purposes. (Students in particular should heed the warning that even Augustan Rome was not 'leashed to one man's grand vision. We do history a disservice if we pretend the city at this moment was an ideological unity. . . . It was much less, and much more, than that' [51].) The final chapters have much to say about continued failures of housing provision, of planning disasters as well as successes, but they also remind us to be optimistic, and not sentimental, speaking of 'the inevitability and the revivifying force of urban change in

[11] *Rome. An Urban History from Antiquity to the Present*. By Rabun Taylor, Katherine W. Rinne, and Spiro Kostof. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xvi + 432. 228 illustrations. Hardback £69.99, ISBN: 978-1-107-01399-5; paperback £24.99, IBSN: 978-1-107-60149-9.

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Rome' (347). It is a pity that there are no references to help readers, only short bibliographies of secondary literature at the end of each chapter, because this is definitely a book to recommend to students and all those with an interest in the ever-fascinating and ongoing history of the city of Rome.

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Art and Archaeology

Visitors to modern Istanbul struggle to imagine how the city as created by Constantine appeared. But the elongated promenade now usually indicated as Sultan Ahmet Parki, but also known as the At-meidam ('Horse-Square'), is vaguely conceivable as the ancient Hippodrome, the centre of public life in imperial Constantinople; and of the numerous monuments that once adorned this area, a trio persists along the site of the 'spine' of the ancient racetrack. Two obelisks are still conspicuous; between them lurks the 'Serpent Column', which was already a piece of antiquity when Constantine had it removed from Delphi. Of all bronzes to survive from the classical world it is perhaps the most deserving of its own 'cultural biography'. This is what Paul Stephenson offers with *The Serpent Column*.[1] He starts in the broadest possible terms – mankind's general phobia of snakes – and then guides the reader through two and a half millennia of the vicissitudes endured by a sacred object wrenched from its 'pagan' purpose and somehow accorded special status within first Christian and then Muslim theocracies. Several times damaged, but never destroyed, the structure originally erected to mark the Greek victory over the Persians at Plataia in 479 BC now serves as a sort of talisman against snakebites. Stephenson calls upon some esoteric sources to inform its symbolic genesis – though disappointingly attempts no reconstruction of how it originally supported a tripod with cauldron – and shows how that symbolism could be adapted in biblical terms. Constantine's motives for relocating the monument remain obscure; nonetheless, we can surely dismiss Gibbon's conclusion that the emperor reveals merely 'the rapacious vanity of a despot'. Recall the tradition that in his new forum he buried, beneath a pillar, an ensemble of relics comprising the Trojan-Roman Palladium, Noah's axe, Mary Magdalene's ointment jar, the crosses of the two thieves, and twelve baskets used by the apostles at the feeding of the five thousand. Superstitious he may have been; yet, by his choice of objects, Constantine also shows a fine sense of cumulative tradition at the juncture of Europe and Asia.

The lower reptilian coils of the Serpent Column were inscribed with the names of thirty-one Greek city-states (more precisely, their citizen-bodies) 'which fought in the war' (to specify 'against the Medes', while epigraphically possible, is not historically necessary). As Lilian Jeffrey showed, the inscription was added by authorities at Delphi, and may not have been part of the original dedication by the Spartan general

[1] *The Serpent Column. A Cultural Biography*. By Paul Stephenson. Onassis Studies in Hellenic Culture. New York, Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xxii + 275. 92 half-tones, 8 line drawings. Hardback £47.99, ISBN: 978-0-19-020906-3.

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