

SPQR

A HISTORY
OF ANCIENT
ROME

MARY BEARD

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PROLOGUE

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THE HISTORY OF ROME

ANCIENT ROME IS important. To ignore the Romans is not just to turn a blind eye to the distant past. Rome still helps to define the way we understand our world and think about ourselves, from high theory to low comedy. After 2,000 years, it continues to underpin Western culture and politics, what we write and how we see the world, and our place in it.

The assassination of Julius Caesar on what the Romans called the Ides of March 44 BCE has provided the template, and the sometimes awkward justification, for the killing of tyrants ever since. The layout of the Roman imperial territory underlies the political geography of modern Europe and beyond. The main reason that London is the capital of the United Kingdom is that the Romans made it the capital of their province Britannia – a dangerous place lying, as they saw it, beyond the great Ocean that encircled the civilised world. Rome has bequeathed to us ideas of liberty and citizenship as much as of imperial exploitation, combined with a vocabulary of modern politics, from ‘senators’ to ‘dictators’. It has loaned us its catchphrases, from ‘fearing Greeks bearing gifts’ to ‘bread and circuses’ and ‘fiddling while Rome burns’ – even ‘where there’s life there’s hope’. And it has prompted laughter, awe and horror in more or less equal measure. Gladiators are as big box office now as they ever were. Virgil’s great epic poem on the foundation of Rome, the *Aeneid*, almost certainly found more readers in the twentieth century CE than it did in the first century CE.

Yet the history of ancient Rome has changed dramatically over

the past fifty years, and even more so over the almost 250 years since Edward Gibbon wrote *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, his idiosyncratic historical experiment that began the modern study of Roman history in the English-speaking world. That is partly because of the new ways of looking at the old evidence, and the different questions we choose to put to it. It is a dangerous myth that we are better historians than our predecessors. We are not. But we come to Roman history with different priorities – from gender identity to food supply – that make the ancient past speak to us in a new idiom.

There has also been an extraordinary array of new discoveries – in the ground, underwater, even lost in libraries – presenting novelties from antiquity that tell us more about ancient Rome than any modern historian could ever have known before. We now have a manuscript of a touching essay by a Roman doctor whose prize possessions had just gone up in flames, which resurfaced in a Greek monastery only in 2005. We have wrecks of Mediterranean cargo ships that never made it to Rome, with their foreign sculpture, furniture and glass destined for the houses of the rich, and the wine and olive oil that were the staples of everyone. As I write, archaeological scientists are carefully examining samples drilled from the ice cap of Greenland to find the traces, even there, of the pollution produced by Roman industry. Others are putting under the microscope the human excrement found in a cesspit in Herculaneum, in southern Italy, to itemise the diet of ordinary Romans as it went into – and out of – their digestive tracts. A lot of eggs and sea urchins are part of the answer.

Roman history is always being rewritten, and always has been; in some ways we know more about ancient Rome than the Romans themselves did. Roman history, in other words, is a work in progress. This book is my contribution to that bigger project; it offers my version of why it matters. *SPQR* takes its title from another famous Roman catchphrase, *Senatus PopulusQue Romanus*, ‘The Senate and People of Rome’. It is driven by a personal curiosity about Roman history, by a

conviction that a dialogue with ancient Rome is still well worth having and by the question of how a tiny and very unremarkable little village in central Italy became so dominant a power over so much territory in three continents.

This is a book about how Rome grew and sustained its position for so long, not about how it declined and fell, if indeed it ever did in the sense that Gibbon imagined. There are many ways that histories of Rome might construct a fitting conclusion; some have chosen the conversion of the emperor Constantine to Christianity on his deathbed in 337 CE or the sack of the city in 410 CE by Alaric and his Visigoths. Mine ends with a culminating moment in 212 CE, when the emperor Caracalla took the step of making every single free inhabitant of the Roman Empire a full Roman citizen, eroding the difference between conqueror and conquered and completing a process of expanding the rights and privileges of Roman citizenship that had started almost a thousand years earlier.

SPQR is not, however, a simple work of admiration. There is much in the classical world – both Roman and Greek – to engage our interest and demand our attention. Our world would be immeasurably the poorer if we did not continue to interact with theirs. But admiration is a different thing. Happily a child of my times, I bridle when I hear people talking of ‘great’ Roman conquerors, or even of Rome’s ‘great’ empire. I have tried to learn to see things from the other side too.

In fact, *SPQR* confronts some of the myths and half-truths about Rome with which I, like many, grew up. The Romans did not start out with a grand plan of world conquest. Although eventually they did parade their empire in terms of some manifest destiny, the motivations that originally lay behind their military expansion through the Mediterranean world and beyond are still one of history’s great puzzles. In acquiring their empire, the Romans did not brutally trample over innocent peoples who were minding their own business in peaceable harmony until the legions appeared on the horizon. Roman

victory was undoubtedly vicious. Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul has not unfairly been compared to genocide and was criticised by Romans at the time in those terms. But Rome expanded into a world not of communities living at peace with one another but of endemic violence, rival power bases backed up by military force (there was not really any alternative backing), and mini-empires. Most of Rome's enemies were as militaristic as the Romans; but, for reasons I shall try to explain, they did not win.

Rome was not simply the thuggish younger sibling of classical Greece, committed to engineering, military efficiency and absolutism, whereas the Greeks preferred intellectual inquiry, theatre and democracy. It suited some Romans to pretend that was the case, and it has suited many modern historians to present the classical world in terms of a simple dichotomy between two very different cultures. That is, as we shall see, misleading, on both sides. The Greek city-states were as keen on winning battles as the Romans were, and most had little to do with the brief Athenian democratic experiment. Far from being unthinking advocates of imperial might, several Roman writers were the most powerful critics of imperialism there have ever been. 'They create desolation and call it peace' is a slogan that has often summed up the consequences of military conquest. It was written in the second century CE by the Roman historian Tacitus, referring to Roman power in Britain.

The history of Rome is a big challenge. There is no single story of Rome, especially when the Roman world had expanded far outside Italy. The history of Rome is not the same as the history of Roman Britain or of Roman Africa. Most of my focus will be on the city of Rome and on Roman Italy, but I shall take care also to look in at Rome from the outside, from the point of view of those living in the wider territories of the empire, as soldiers, rebels or ambitious collaborators. And very different kinds of history have to be written for different periods. For the earliest history of Rome and when it was expanding

in the fourth century BCE from small village to major player in the Italian peninsula, there are no accounts written by contemporary Romans at all. The story has to be a bold work of reconstruction, which must squeeze individual pieces of evidence – a single fragment of pottery, or a few letters inscribed on stone – as hard as it can. Only three centuries later the problem is quite the reverse: how to make sense of the masses of competing contemporary evidence that may threaten to swamp any clear narrative.

Roman history also demands a particular sort of imagination. In some ways, to explore ancient Rome from the twenty-first century is rather like walking on a tightrope, a very careful balancing act. If you look down on one side, everything seems reassuringly familiar: there are conversations going on that we almost join, about the nature of freedom or problems of sex; there are buildings and monuments we recognise and family life lived out in ways we understand, with all their troublesome adolescents; and there are jokes that we ‘get’. On the other side, it seems completely alien territory. That means not just the slavery, the filth (there was hardly any such thing as refuse collection in ancient Rome), the human slaughter in the arena and the death from illnesses whose cure we now take for granted; but also the newborn babies thrown away on rubbish heaps, the child brides and the flamboyant eunuch priests.

This is a world we will begin to explore through one particular moment of Roman history, which the Romans never ceased to puzzle over and which modern writers, from historians to dramatists, have never ceased to debate. It offers the best introduction to some of the key characters of ancient Rome, to the richness of Romans’ discussion of their own past and to the ways in which we continue to recapture and try to make sense of it – and to why the history of Rome, its Senate and its People still matter.

CHAPTER ONE

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CICERO'S FINEST HOUR

SPQR: 63 BCE

OUR HISTORY OF ancient Rome begins in the middle of the first century BCE, more than 600 years after the city was founded. It begins with promises of revolution, with a terrorist conspiracy to destroy the city, with undercover operations and public harangues, with a battle fought between Romans and Romans, and with citizens (innocent or not) rounded up and summarily executed in the interests of homeland security. The year is 63 BCE. On the one side is Lucius Sergius Catilina ('Catiline' in English), a disgruntled, bankrupt aristocrat and the architect of a plot, so it was believed, to assassinate Rome's elected officials and burn the place down – writing off all debts, of rich and poor alike, in the process. On the other side is Marcus Tullius Cicero (just 'Cicero' from now on), the famous orator, philosopher, priest, poet, politician, wit and raconteur, one of those marked out for assassination – and a man who never ceased to use his rhetorical talents to boast how he had uncovered Catiline's terrible plot and saved the state. This was his finest hour.

In 63 BCE the city of Rome was a vast metropolis of more than a million inhabitants, larger than any other in Europe before the nineteenth century; and, although as yet it had no emperors, it ruled over an empire stretching from Spain to Syria, from the South of France to

the Sahara. It was a sprawling mixture of luxury and filth, liberty and exploitation, civic pride and murderous civil war. In the chapters that follow we shall look much further back, to the very start of Roman time and to the early exploits, belligerent and otherwise, of the Roman people. We shall think about what lies behind some of those stories of early Rome that still strike a chord today, from ‘Romulus and Remus’ to ‘The Rape of Lucretia.’ And we shall be asking questions that historians have asked since antiquity itself. How, and why, did an ordinary little town in central Italy grow so much bigger than any other city in the ancient Mediterranean and come to control such a huge empire? What, if anything, was special about the Romans? But with the history of Rome it makes little sense to begin the story at the very beginning.

It is only in the first century BCE that we can start to explore Rome, close up and in vivid detail, through contemporary eyes. An extraordinary wealth of words survives from this period: from private letters to public speeches, from philosophy to poetry – epic and erotic, scholarly and straight from the street. Thanks to all this, we can still follow the day-to-day wheeling and dealing of Rome’s political grandees. We can eavesdrop on their bargaining and their trade-offs and glimpse their back-stabbing, metaphorical and literal. We can even get a taste of their private lives: their marital tiffs, their cash-flow problems, their grief at the death of beloved children, or occasionally of their beloved slaves. There is no earlier period in the history of the West that it is possible to get to know quite so well or so intimately (we have nothing like such rich and varied evidence from classical Athens). It is not for more than a millennium, in the world of Renaissance Florence, that we find any other place that we can know in such detail again.

What is more, it was during the first century BCE that Roman writers themselves began systematically to study the earlier centuries of their city and their empire. Curiosity about Rome’s past certainly goes back further than that: we can still read, for example, an analysis of the city’s rise to power written by a Greek resident in the mid second

century BCE. But it is only from the first century BCE that Roman scholars and critics began to pose many of the historical questions that we still pose even now. By a process that combined learned research with a good deal of constructive invention, they pieced together a version of early Rome that we still rely on today. We still see Roman history, at least in part, through first-century BCE eyes. Or, to put it another way, Roman *history*, as we know it, started here.

Sixty-three BCE is a significant year in that crucial century. It was a time of near disaster for the city. Over the 1,000 years that we will be exploring in this book, Rome faced danger and defeat many times. Around 390 BCE, for example, a posse of marauding Gauls occupied the city. In 218 BCE the Carthaginian warlord, Hannibal, famously crossed the Alps with his thirty-seven elephants and inflicted terrible losses on the Romans before they eventually managed to fight him off. Roman estimates of casualties at the Battle of Cannae in 216 BCE, up to 70,000 deaths in a single afternoon, make it as great a bloodbath as Gettysburg or the first day of the Somme, maybe even greater. And, almost equally fearsome in the Roman imagination, in the 70s BCE a scratch force of ex-gladiators and runaways, under the command of Spartacus, proved more than a match for some ill-trained legions. The Romans were never as invincible in battle as we tend to assume, or as they liked to make out. In 63 BCE, however, they faced the enemy within, a terrorist plot at the heart of the Roman establishment.

The story of this crisis can still be traced in intimate detail, day by day, occasionally hour by hour. We know precisely where much of it happened, and in a few places we can still look up to some of exactly the same monuments as dominated the scene in 63 BCE. We can follow the sting operations that gave Cicero his information on the plot and see how Catiline was forced out of the city to his makeshift army north of Rome and into a battle with the official Roman legions that cost him his life. We can also glimpse some of the arguments, controversies and wider questions that the crisis raised and still does. The tough



1. The heavy arches and columns of the ‘*Tabularium*’, built into Michelangelo’s Palazzo above, is still a major landmark at one end of the Roman Forum. Constructed just a couple of decades before Cicero was consul in 63 BCE, it must then have seemed one of the most splendid recent architectural developments. Its function is less clear. It was obviously a public building of some kind, but not necessarily the ‘Record Office’ (*tabularium*) that is often assumed.

response by Cicero – including those summary executions – presented in stark form issues that trouble us even today. Is it legitimate to eliminate ‘terrorists’ outside the due processes of law? How far should civil rights be sacrificed in the interests of homeland security? The Romans never ceased to debate ‘The Conspiracy of Catiline’, as it came to be known. Was Catiline wholly evil, or was there something to be said in mitigation of what he did? At what price was revolution averted? The events of 63 BCE, and the catchphrases created then, have continued to resonate throughout Western history. Some of the exact words spoken in the tense debates that followed the discovery