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The Historiography of the Late Roman Republic

Guy Williams

They then desisted, but Marius and Sulpicius went to confront him near the forum on the Esquiline with as many men as they had time to arm, and there took place a struggle between political enemies which was the first war conducted in Rome not under the guise of civil dissention, but nakedly as a war, complete with trumpets and military standards; such was the catastrophe to which their recklessness in political quarreling had led them.

—Appian, *The Civil Wars*

By the mid-second century BC, the Roman Republic appeared to be on the ascendency. The Third Punic War had ended with the defeat of Carthage in 146 BC and cemented the position of Rome as the preeminent military power in the Mediterranean region.¹ Despite the apparent success of the military, the period from 133 BC until 27 BC marked a critical time in Roman history as the Republic began a perilous slide towards internecine warfare that eventually ended with the transformation of the Roman Republic into the Roman Empire.

The problem facing modern historians centers on the causal factors behind the changes of the Roman Republic. Economic and political factors such as the struggle between the *patricii* (aristocrat class) and the *plebes* (common people), civil war, and the denigration of Roman law all influenced the transformative process.² While each of these causal factors contributed to the evolution of the Roman Republic, they did not encompass the entire scope of the process of change or explain the machinations behind key events and people who contributed to Rome's emergence as an empire. Amongst the myriad factors that contributed to the demise of the Republic, one rose above the others as the prime enabler to the transformative process. The Roman legions presented the one common denominator that the causal factors shared and became the fulcrum point between key events and historical figures. Modern historiography about the late Roman Republic pays scant attention to the crucial relationship between the military and the civil authorities and their resulting effect upon the transformation process of the Republic.

Modern historians have addressed fundamental factors behind the evolution

of the Republic, but they have not fully integrated the process of legislation, politics, societal norms, and civil war that drove events *en toto*. Instead, historians have weighted individual causal factors or events rather than examining the transformation process. The civil wars that rocked the failing Roman Republic did not result from a simple desire for change or a collective attempt by the military to usurp the Roman government, but were a response from an organization that no longer held the same strong civil ties to a state that existed as a shadow of itself.³ The legions provided a vehicle for individuals to gain power and to dismantle the checks and balances that originally existed, such as *consul* (highest elected public official in the Republic), term limits, and the appointment of two consuls to prevent tyranny or a strong central government under the control of one leader. By examining the transformation process and the role of the Roman military during the process, evidence demonstrates the importance of soldier-citizen relations and the preeminence of power politics in the Roman Republic.

During the transformation, the Roman legions evolved from a citizen militia into a full-time professional army that gave its loyalty not to a state or government, but to leaders who rewarded the legions' loyalty. The Roman military became a political tool and the power behind key figures who sought to grasp the reins of state leadership and exercise absolute authority over Rome. As historian David Shotter notes in *The Fall of the Roman Republic, Second Edition* (2005), "Thus, individuals and factions came to see that they could exploit the republic's forms for their own needs, and at the expense of their peers."⁴ The tenuous relationship between the Roman Senate and the military grew increasingly strained, as the Senate sought to marginalize military leaders with legislation, and the military negated the power of the Senate by force of arms. The professionalization of the Roman army alienated the legions from the state and enabled the application of power by one individual to determine the domestic and foreign affairs of Rome.

After the end of the Third Punic War, the Roman Republic emerged as a hegemonic power in the Mediterranean region. The Republic did not possess a government or logistical infrastructure to handle the associated challenges of managing an expanding population, increased geographical areas of responsibility, and internal struggles between social classes and individuals striving for greater power.⁵ The change from a republic to an empire occurred gradually, and contemporary scholars of the era noted many of the changes but lacked the historical hindsight of later historians to appreciate the scope and importance of the change.

Primary Sources

One of the earliest Roman historians, Gaius Sallustius Crispus, “Sallust” (86-35 BC), recognized the inherent fear and trepidation of the era brought on by years of civil war. Sallust not only recorded events, but also sought to impart guidance to his contemporary readers. In his speech to Caesar, Sallust wrote, “Moreover, the victors demand booty, the vanquished are fellow citizens. Amidst these difficulties you have to make your way, and strengthen the state for the future, not in arms only and against the enemy, but also in the kindly arts of peace, a task far, far, thornier.”⁶ Sallust recognized the inherent difficulties with divisive politics and civil wars that pitted Roman against Roman. Sallust wrote an informative commentary similar to the style of the Greek historian Thucydides (c.460-c.400 BC), who sought to impart wisdom to his peers. Additionally, Sallust’s terse style emphasized brevity and conveyed a judgmental tone. He worried about the decaying status of Rome’s elite and sought to warn the *patricii* of their growing decadence.

While the Roman elite appeared to drift farther from the consensus of the plebes, the civil wars that rocked Rome in the first century BC touched all aspects of Roman life. The legions that fought fellow legionnaires and citizens alike began to give their loyalty to their commanders rather than to the state. During this period, journals and books from key leaders offered historians a glimpse into the popular sentiment and political topics of the day. For example, Gaius Julius Caesar, “Caesar” (100-44 BC), cemented his popularity and image as a cultish figure through his writings. Caesar wrote *The Gallic Wars*, not from any obligation to record history, but to keep his name fresh in the mind of Roman citizens and to project a favorable image. He wrote, “Yet Caesar decided that he must endure it all, so long as he still had some hope of deciding the issue according to law, rather than by fighting it out.”⁷ This statement sounded reasonable to the casual reader, but in reality Caesar made little attempt to heed the dictates of the Roman Senate. While Caesar used his book for political purposes, other Roman leaders like Marcus Tullius Cicero, “Cicero” (106-43 BC), wrote letters, books, and journals that extolled the virtues of the earlier Roman Republic, and in particular, the examples of Greek philosophers.

Cicero offered readers the unique perspective of a key participant in the events that helped change Rome. In *Cicero: Selected Works* (1960), translated by Michael Grant, a compilation of speeches and personal letters conveyed to historians the pragmatic politics at play within the Roman Senate. Like Caesar, Cicero occupied an important position in Roman affairs as a senator and gifted orator. While Caesar sought to centralize authority, Cicero urged for the return of power to the

many rather than the one. Although Cicero initially favored Caesar as a matter of political expedience, he began to resent the growing power of Caesar and the threat he posed to the traditional Roman Republic. Cicero advanced that only a madman sought to be king and stated, “for he [Caesar] justifies the destruction of law and liberty and thinks their hideous and detestable destruction glorious.”⁸ Cicero’s writings warned against the absolute power of tyranny and the erosion of senatorial powers. However, Cicero did not write about the changes within the legions. Cicero recognized key individuals, but did not describe how those individuals used the legions as a political tool to degrade senatorial powers. Cicero did not live to see the eventual fall of the Roman Republic, because Marcus Antonius (83-20 BC) ordered his murder in 43 BC.⁹ Cicero’s dire warnings about the fall of the Roman Republic soon came to fruition after his death.

Later Roman historians such as Titus Livius, “Livy” (59 BC-17 AD), sought to write a comprehensive history of Rome. Livy recognized the change that had occurred after the rise of Augustus and attempted to write an accurate narrative. He relied less on flowery rhetoric and more on the recognition that the “rise of a state to greatness was based on its people possessing a number of proper character traits (*virtutes*) and not, as for [the Greek historian] Polybius, on a proper constitutional arrangement.”¹⁰ Although much of Livy’s work did not survive, later historians such as Lucius Annaeus Florus, “Florus” (74-130 AD), borrowed from Livy to supplement their own histories of Rome.

Two interesting historians emerged during the early Roman Empire who used historical biography as a lens to examine the military and political exploits of Roman leaders. Lucius Mestrius Plutarchus, “Plutarch” (46-120 AD), wrote in the early second century AD. Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* compared twenty-three pairs of Greek leaders to corresponding Roman leaders in a series of biographies of Greek and Roman history. Plutarch used historical events as a backdrop and focused more on the character of his subject rather than the historical events surrounding his subject. Plutarch wrote, “May I therefore succeed in purifying Fable, making her submit to reason and take on the semblance of History. But where she [events of history] obstinately disdains to make herself credible, and refuses to admit any element of probability, I shall pray for kindly readers, and as such receive with indulgence the tales of antiquity.”¹¹ Plutarch used a popular narrative to entertain his readers about historical figures rather than objective analysis.

Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, “Suetonius” (70-130 AD), wrote his book *The Twelve Caesars* during the same period as Plutarch, but he employed a different

approach to his biographies. Whereas Plutarch focused almost exclusively on the character of his subjects, Suetonius linked historical events to his key figures and then described the personal aspects of each person. Suetonius enjoyed access to official records and limited audiences with Emperors Trajan and Hadrian, and those privileges allowed him to write with greater credibility. However, Suetonius did not hesitate to chronicle the rumors and examples of debauchery of the emperors as evidenced by his description of Augustus's penchant for virgins.¹² Regardless of the accuracy of the rumors that surrounded the subjects of Suetonius, his writings offered a snapshot into the collective psyche of Roman society and how they perceived their emperors.

The Roman historian Appian (c.95-c.165 AD) broke from the traditional historical biography narrative and wrote a comprehensive history called *Roman History*. Although much of Appian's work no longer exists, his five volumes that dealt with the period 135 BC-35 BC did survive. The five volumes detailed the key events of the Roman Republic's transformation in the last century BC. Appian focused almost exclusively on war and struggle with his narrative. In *Appian: The Civil Wars* (1996), historian John Carter remarked that Appian focused on war and conflict because he saw them as "symptoms of decline from a peaceful and law-abiding polity into the ultimate chaos of civil war."¹³ While Appian did not associate the professionalization of the legions with the civil wars, his detailed description of events built an excellent foundation for other historians.

Lucius Cassius Dio, "Dio" (150-235 AD), followed Appian, and of the ancient historians, wrote the most comprehensive history of Rome. His work *Roman History* began with the founding of Rome and ended in the third century AD.¹⁴ Dio's books described a period of over one millennium and sought to emulate the objectivity of Thucydides, but did not convey the same cool logic and objective realism that his predecessor imparted. However, Dio's work did provide a serious scholarly attempt to record a massive history, and he used many primary sources that no longer exist.

Modern Historical Sources

While the primary sources on Roman history provide invaluable information and offer a flavor of the period, they do not contain the hindsight and objectivity of modern historians. The ancient historians did not see the transformation of Rome from a republic to an empire, but rather viewed the changes as symptoms of decadence or even progress. They did not possess the objective viewpoint to compare the two eras because the historians lived either during or soon after the change. The

position of the modern historian allows an objective view of the events and the technology to incorporate primary sources with modern disciplines to develop an inclusive examination of the era. Writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Theodor Mommsen (1817-1907) offered just such an inclusive method.

Mommsen approached Roman history with a certain proclivity towards socio-economic factors. His massive three-volume *History of Rome* published from 1854-1856 presented one of the most complete summaries of the Roman Republic since Edward Gibbon's earlier work *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Mommsen's writings almost mirrored the early twentieth-century French Annales School with his writing style, because he not only analyzed key events, but also described social norms, economies, and weighted the social class struggles of Rome over other causal factors.

Ronald Syme (1903-1989) viewed the fall of the Roman Republic as a matter of revolution rather than a power struggle enabled by the Roman legions. Syme's *The Roman Revolution* (1939) focused on Augustus but offered a concise analysis of the events leading up to the ascendancy of Augustus. Syme did not believe the eventual peace or *Pax Romana* resulted from constitutional and senatorial reform, but rather as "the peace of despotism."¹⁵

Historian Erich Gruen stands opposite of Syme in his analysis of the fall of the Roman Republic. Gruen's *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic* (1974) did not portray the rise of Augustus as a matter of expediency. Gruen stresses that his work "was not to search for the weakness that brought about the Republic's fall but to examine the practices and conventions that kept it going so long. Transformation of the state into a monarchical regime can be laid to the charge of a devastating civil war, rather than to the putative disintegration of institutions and morale in the previous decades."¹⁶ He maintains a centrist approach that recognizes many of the associated factors, but does not attribute the change from a republic to an empire to any historical figure. Gruen theorizes, "Civil war caused the failure of the Republic—not vice versa."¹⁷ Gruen identifies key factors such as the suspension of the *Capite Censi* (those counted by head), the *Lex Sevilia Glaucia* (Servilius Glaucia Law), and the professionalization of the Roman legions as causal factors that contributed to the demise of the Roman Republic. Additionally, Gruen theorizes that the transformation that occurred after Gaius Octavius (Augustus) defeated the forces of Cleopatra and Marcus Antonius did not happen because of inevitable progression, but resulted from the cumulative legislations and changes to the Roman military.

While Gruen did not attempt reductionism to explain the disintegration of the Republic, he correctly identifies many of the contributing factors behind the fall of the Republic in a concise manner.

Other current modern historians such as Michael Grant and Adrian Goldsworthy write extensively about the events before, during, and after the transformation but do not associate the Roman legions as the principle enabler behind the disintegration of the Republic. While Grant focuses on major events and key individuals, other historians look to the evidence left behind by the *populus* (general population) to flesh out the societal norms and daily activities of the ancient Romans. Historians Paul Veyne and Georges Duby from the Annales School examine the culture of the common citizen of Rome in their book *A History of Private Life: From Pagan Rome to Byzantium* (1987).¹⁸ Their unique compilation of daily rituals and habits illustrates the common psyche of the Roman people and helps researchers lose some of their anachronistic bias and better relate to the events of the time.

Historians continue to debate the various causal factors behind the transformation of the Roman Republic. The key events, figures, and legislation during the critical years of 133-27 BC marked a period of great challenges to the civilization of Rome. Political scientist Samuel P. Huntington captured the timeless truism of the importance of the civil/military relationship in his book, *The Soldier and State: The Theory of and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (1957). He stated, “The military institutions of any society are shaped by two forces: a functional imperative stemming from the threats to the society’s security and a social imperative arising from the social forces, ideologies, and institutions dominant within the society.”¹⁹ Huntington’s statement highlighted the criticality of Rome’s military during the fall of the Republic as it metamorphosed from a citizen army focused on existential threats to the Roman state to a professional army commanded by individuals who wielded the army as a political tool to secure power and personal gain. Individually none of these items caused the fall of the Republic, but collectively they led to civil wars that forever changed the method of governance in Rome and the role of the military in Roman politics. The professionalization of the Roman army alienated the legions from the state and enabled the application of power by individuals to determine the domestic and foreign affairs of Rome. A review of the modern literature suggests that additional research is warranted because, although many theories exist about the fall of the Roman Republic, little existing literature demonstrates the criticality of the soldier and civilian relationship

in the Roman Republic and how the legion emerged as the key enabler behind the transformation of the Republic.

Notes

1. Adrian Goldsworthy, *The Fall of Carthage: The Punic Wars, 265-146 BC* (London, UK: Phoenix, 2006), 12.
2. Erik Hildinger, *Swords Against the Senate: The Rise of the Roman Army and the Fall of the Republic* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002), ix-xi.
3. Erich S. Gruen, *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic* (London, UK: University of California Press, 1974), 375.
4. David Shotter, *The Fall of the Roman Republic*, 2nd ed. (London, UK: Routledge, 2005), 99.
5. Susan O. Shapiro, *O Tempora! O Mores! Cicero's Catilinarian Orations: A Student Edition with Historical Essays* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005), 203.
6. Gaius Sallust, *The Speech to Caesar*, 1.8., ed. Bill Thayer, last modified April 28, 2009, accessed May 30, 2015, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Sallust/psuedo/Oratio_ad_Caesarem*.html.
7. Gaius Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War*, trans. Carolyn Hammond (New York: Oxford University press, 1996, 2008 Reprint), 222.
8. Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Selected Works*, trans. Michael Grant (London, UK: Penguin Books, 1960, 1971 Reprint), 357.
9. Marcel Le Glay et al., *A History of Rome* 4th ed. (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 162.
10. Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 64.
11. Plutarch, *The Parallel Lives*, 1.4., ed. Bill Thayer, last modified April 10, 2011, accessed May 30, 2015, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/LivesTheseus*.html.
12. Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves, Rev. ed. (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), 84.
13. Appian, *The Civil Wars*, trans. John Carter (London: Penguin Books, 1966), xxxiii.
14. Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, ed. Bill Thayer, last modified June 18, 2011, accessed May 30, 2015, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Cassius_Dio/home.html.
15. Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, Rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 9.
16. Gruen, *The Last Generation of the Roman Republic*, xx.
17. *Ibid.*, 504.
18. Paul Veyne, ed., *A History of Private Life: From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*. trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987).

19. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil Military Relations* (Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957, 1985 Reprint), 2.

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