

BOOK REVIEW

The Earliest Romans: A Character Sketch. By Ramsay MACMULLEN. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011. Pp. xi + 193. Hardcover, \$65.00. ISBN 978-0-472-11798-7.

This short work (126 pages of preface and main-text), by a well-known and prolific scholar of the ancient Mediterranean world, proposes to tell the story of the early Romans—a task made all the more difficult by the lack of trustworthy historical information. MacMullen proposes to do this, rather uniquely, by breaking down the Roman personality into (what he feels are) four defining, salient features: conservative, tolerant, aggressive and practical. By doing so, he invokes the spirit, if not the method, of “the first real genius in what we would now call sociopolitical studies, Alexis de Tocqueville” (viii), who was an eye-witness to the United States of the Jacksonian era (i.e. the 1820s and 1830s). The book is divided into two halves, Part 1 to 509 BC, and Part 2 from 509 to 264, each with four chapters on the elements of the Roman personality noted above; a concluding “Wrap Up” finishes the book, followed by 40+ pages of end-notes and another 20+ of up-to-date bibliography.¹

MacMullen admits from the beginning that he is from the more skeptical school of thought about the trustworthiness of the written historical sources, and indeed invokes archaeological and topographical evidence to support his analyses quite frequently. I myself admit a great deal of sympathy toward this school of thought. For example, he rightly throws up his hands about the nature of the early Roman military (at 53: “Before the fifth century all that can be said with certainty is what is too obvious: the Roman army consisted of infantry and caval-

¹ I found only a few significant typos or editorial mishaps. On p. 36, “Manilian Tower” should be “Mamilian Tower.” The map on p. 39 is a bit confusing in that some of the dots marking settlements have no names attached to them. On p. 48, MacMullen calls the family involved in the Lupercalia the “Quintilii” though on p. 19 he had called them the “Quinctii”; they are named both ways in our sources: *ILS* 1923, *ILS* 4948, *CIL* 6.33421, Ver. Fl. ap. Fest. [Paul.] 78L, Prop. 4.1.26 and Ov. *Fast.* 2.375–8, cf. Ver. Fl. ap. Fest. 308L (though badly mutilated, “Quinctilii” may be restored. On p. 145, n. 24, the work cited should be Crawford (1974) not (1971).

ry ...”). But he also has an excellent, critical analysis of early Roman armor, weapons and fighting-style (103–4). Furthermore, he correctly questions the census figures for early Rome, though, importantly, not the census itself (101–2).

Unfortunately, this does not prevent MacMullen from following the historical tradition in main at points, even when there is no supporting material evidence. This is a trap that many “skeptics” have fallen into: decrying the uncritical use of the written source material without ever explicating a methodology for when and how one ought to approach information only carried in literary sources like (say) Livy. For example, MacMullen accepts not only that the story of the immigration of the first Claudius and his retinue to Rome right after the beginning of the Republic to be more or less true (based solely on literary sources, which are not united in their details²), but that it must mean that Rome already possessed *ager publicus* by that point in their history to be distributed to these proto-Claudii (48–9). There is also his acceptance of the so-called “Struggle of the Orders,” also only known from our literary sources (70–5 and 98ff.; at 98: “These success were won without bloodshed or other great risks ... and, since the tribunate and assembly are fixtures in subsequent history and their origin is not placed in any other moment, the outline of these events may be accepted as fact.”).

MacMullen is also not immune to various common assumptions, increasingly called into question, about the nature of early Rome. For instance, he falls into the common trap of assuming that religious rites and practices are windows into Rome’s remote past since their “conservative” personality compelled the Romans to keep all of these things unchanged, even when they no longer understood their purpose or even the archaic Latin which they spoke during certain rituals (8ff.). The only problem with this old idea is often that, where we *can* see rituals diachronically, they *do* change quite remarkably in their practice and meaning: e.g., the cult of Anna Perenna and the Lupercalia Festival.³ Another common sentiment about early Rome that MacMullen espouses is that Rome must have come to Greek culture only through “a more or less Etruscanized translation,” even as he admits that there is more Greek than Etruscan in early Roman material culture (24).

² B. J. Kavanagh, “The Admission of the Claudian Family to Rome,” *AHB* 4 (1990) 129–132.

³ T. P. Wiseman, *Unwritten Rome* (Exeter 2008) 18–22, 77–8.

It is very difficult to know to whom to recommend this book. Its lack of detail makes it less useful for a specialist on early Rome, except where MacMullen discusses issues that are less well-known or widely-recognized, like his description of the on-going debate about the authenticity of the Capitoline Wolf and the modern political (i.e. Italian nationalistic) forces that are influencing this scholarly discussion (31–2). Yet this work is also too detailed for all but the best-informed lay-person. It is perhaps best recommended to specialists, or aspiring ones, in other areas of Roman or ancient studies who are looking for a readable, solid introduction to some of the problems and controversies in the study of early Rome and its historiography. The thoroughness of the bibliography and endnotes certainly means that such scholars can be assured of getting the latest ideas out there. One suspects that few scholars, however, will be satisfied by the simplistic notion that Rome's "personality," across centuries of history, can be consistently distilled into four common features.

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