

## BOOK REVIEW

*Ancient Rome: A History*. Second Edition. By D. BRENDAN NAGLE. New York: Sloan Publishing, 2013. Pp. xv + 479. Paper, \$57.95. ISBN 978-1-59738-042-3.

Instructors for survey Roman history classes who wish to have students purchase a textbook for background reading, preparation for class discussions, or testing material have an array of strong choices.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the subject, however, it is natural to be suspicious of a new textbook edition released only a few short years after the previous one. Nagle's second edition of his problem-centered survey of Roman history, which postdates the first by just three years, is a potential target for such skepticism. Fortunately, it exceeds expectations with a number of wise and well-executed changes to and expansions of the original text.<sup>2</sup>

The important and valuable elements have not changed. Nagle's approach is based on a framework of substantial and interrelated questions about Rome's origins, development, and metamorphoses under the pressures pursuant to imperial expansion—questions to which Nagle applies satisfying analysis, woven into the traditional narrative. The text's scope is broad, beginning with the discussion of Rome's place in the larger Mediterranean context and debts to earlier civilizations and ending with the expansion of Islam and considerations on the survival of the Eastern Empire. Short introductions to each of the text's eight parts (an increase from seven in the first edition) allow readers to orient themselves towards the chronological period and subjects to be discussed in each chapter, and to contextualize the thematic questions.

Nagle's additional gift to perceptive and thoughtful students is his cogent framing of Roman institutional concepts that students are prone to misunderstand, particularly through modern Western preconceptions, e.g. the nature of

<sup>1</sup> Recent editions of popular choices include *The Romans: From Village to Empire: A History of Rome from Earliest Times to the End of the Western Empire* (Mary T. Boatwright *et al.*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2011), *Ancient Rome: A New History* (David Potter, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2014), *A History of the Roman People* (Allan Ward *et al.*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. 2013).

<sup>2</sup> My own Roman history students of the Fall 2012 and Spring 2014 semesters gave me the opportunity to test-drive both editions in relatively quick succession.

Roman religion and its relationship to political life, the definitions of the family and household, and the political culture of imperial administration. Nagle understands his readership and deftly anticipates potential sources of confusion as he introduces difficult topics.

On the whole, the alterations in the second edition serve Nagle's approach and audience very well. A set of questions for reflection and discussion has been included at the end of each part. These make excellent starting points for review of the material while it is still fresh, for class discussion, and to assist students in solidifying their grasp of the broader themes. The period from the First Punic War to the destruction of Corinth and Carthage is now more sensibly treated as its own part (II: Rome Becomes an Imperial Power). The strongest improvement is the addition of two individual chapters in Part I (4: Roman Religion and 5: Roman Society) to expand on what previously totaled only ten pages in the first edition, as part of the explanation for the rise of the Republic.

In the chapter on religion, Nagle takes the opportunity to unpack Western models of "true religion" and religious behavior so that students may understand Roman religion as a key aspect of citizenship. He adds several illustrative excerpts from primary sources, a simple discussion on the Roman calendar, and clearer commentary on the authoritative position of the Senate on religious matters.<sup>3</sup> The chapter on Roman society has been similarly expanded to reflect the economic self-sufficiency and autonomy of the Roman household. The enlargement of the discussions on marriage and slavery in particular are much-appreciated improvements.

Nagle has added more (and clearer) subheadings to most chapters to break up long passages of text and to help emphasize the salient points of each section (e.g. on the new patrician-plebeian elite in Roman magistracies, "Concord not Democracy", 79). There are a few cavils: an overly trendy subheading on Rome's unique hybrid state refers to it as Rome's "Killer App" (64), and the layers of headings and subheadings can be cumbersome and misleading at times (e.g. a discussion of the practicalities of melding religion and politics actually precedes the heading "Religion and Politics", 97–100—perhaps simply a hazard of a topic that cannot easily be divided into discrete sub-topics).

Despite the addition of the new chapters, the page count is actually lower than the first edition, thanks to a smaller but very readable typeface and judicious

<sup>3</sup> Nagle's inclusion of primary source excerpts throughout the text is helpful; it is a shame that his sourcebook (*The Roman World: Sources and Interpretation*, New Jersey: Pearson, 2005) is out of print.

editing and rearrangement of material throughout the text. Most maps are clearer and better labeled, a number of excellent photographs have been added, and many are larger and of higher quality than in the first edition. Other images should have been updated (e.g. an eye-strainingly faint map of Mediterranean trade routes on 2) or omitted entirely (e.g. the unnecessary A-B-C diagram of “central place theory” on 57). It is also bit disappointing to see typographical errors carried over from the first edition, plus additional ones, some perhaps due to the process of rearranging existing material.<sup>4</sup> These are minor concerns, however, over a text that is well-suited to stimulating insightful discussion in a perceptive undergraduate class.

ALEXANDRA HOLBROOK

*University of Texas-Pan American*, holbrookal@utpa.edu

<sup>4</sup> Carried over: e.g. The duplication of an entire paragraph (30 and 175); new: e.g. “Hasdrubal” for “Hasdrubal” (143) and “Maxentiuus” for “Maxentius” (405). A puzzling comment on 108 suggests that the chapter on Roman society was perhaps originally intended to precede the one on Roman Religion.



