

## BOOK REVIEW

*Ancient Rome: A History, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* By D. BRENDAN NAGLE. Cornwall-on-Hudson, N.Y.: Sloan Publishing, 2013. Pp. xv + 475. Paper, \$57.95. ISBN 978-1-59738-042-3.

In this second edition, D. Brendan Nagle treats fifteen hundred years of Roman and post-Roman history from the legendary founding of Rome in 753 BC essentially down to AD 732, a somewhat contentious date, when East and West met in the battle of Poitiers (often called the battle of Tours to distinguish it from the more famous homonymous battle of the Hundred Years War). Nagle's account benefits both from his Mediterranean approach to Roman history and from greater academic interest in global points of view; as a result, his work aims to avoid—successfully for the most part—prejudging Roman developments based on much later European history while also contextualizing those developments as a breakaway phenomenon in their Mediterranean context.

Overall, Nagle progresses topically within a generalized chronological framework, which means including, as he does, a number of internal markers to tie the structure together. There are many helpful photos, figures, and maps and a generous use throughout of pointed quotations from ancient authors. The text is divided into eight major parts, subdivided into twenty chapters, treating (1) Rome's rise from its foundation to Mediterranean power, emphasizing its early growth in Italy; (2) Rome as imperial power after the First Punic War; (3) the fall of the republic; (4) the Republic Restored and the Augustan principate together with its artistic and architectural program; (5) the consolidation of the principate under the Julio-Claudians and Flavians; (6) the institutional, social, and cultural factors that held the empire together; (7) Rome on the defensive in the third century AD; and (8) the world of Late Antiquity, which leads into discussions of the Byzantine Empire, the rise of Islam, and the Franks as successors of Rome. Each of the eight parts is introduced by a brief discussion related to the overarching themes that tie the book together, and then concludes with a list of questions for students to review. There is also a 6-page guide to suggested readings. The author's style is clear, and the chronological breadth is rewarding but does introduce its own attendant difficulties.

This edition includes two new chapters, which unfortunately read like plug-ins; no other enhancements are claimed. Roman religion is, above all, a political religion, and the absence of a focused treatment of it in the first edition was a major shortcoming. Now “Roman Religion” (chapter 4) also complements and balances the required later treatments of the three Abrahamic religions and the transformative role of monotheism in Late Roman culture. “Roman Society” (chapter 5), also a necessary addition, stresses the household as the foundation of the Roman state and highlights “what we might call political, social, cultural—even technological—capital” of the Roman household (121).

Otherwise this edition has the virtues of the first, and its great strengths are touted on the back cover. The author’s argument has a distinctive problem-centered approach and an intelligent and comprehensible emphasis on contextualization and analysis. This approach enhances Nagle’s discussions of the growth and spread of Rome, its three wars with Carthage, the overall Augustan settlement and subsequent institutionalization of the principate, and what bound together and sustained the Roman Empire, and he maintains a clear focus on Rome’s strong institutions, specifically, its political and administrative system, social structure, army, and belief systems. Two strong features are the emphasis on Rome’s Mediterranean context, and the extended treatment of Late Antiquity, which more or less reaches to AD 732. Thus, the sketch of the Byzantine Empire, the Germanic kingdoms, and the rise of Islam go beyond some more familiar Roman history textbooks. Many of these later developments are valuable for our students to understand either as parts or, perhaps, as byproducts of Roman history.

In addition to longer illustrative quotes given in boxed format, the argument also is helped by the frequent use of quotations from ancient sources that are built into the author’s narrative (although not all of them are uniformly or fully sourced). This feature is particularly striking early on when Aristotle, Plato, or Thucydides is cited. The consistent use of technical Latin terms, defined when first used in the text, and also supported by an 8-page glossary, helps to set the serious academic tone. Nagle, however, prefers *res publica* as a translation of *polis* and avoids almost entirely the term *civitas*, which is very odd in an extended argument that identifies “Rome’s *polis* constitution” with “Rome’s existing *politeia*” (163). He then eschews theoretical discussion of Rome’s *civitas* in its native terms, a puzzling choice since Rome was more generous than other ancient states in extending its citizenship, and all the more problematic since many scholars now think “citizen-state” is a better translation of *polis* than “city-state.”

Nagle understands that the Romans adapted the *polis* form of government to their own needs, and in fact from early on, according to him, the revision of *polis* government becomes one of the characteristic Roman strategies of political survival. It would be helpful, therefore, to highlight the alternate Latin equivalent of *polis* since *civitas* is more expressive about what a so-called Roman *polis* is: in essentially Ciceronian terms, a *civitas* “exists as a political community (not as a geographic reality) when a group of individuals come to agreement as to the laws and institutions which they would have to govern them subsequently” (P. López Barja de Quiroga and F. J. Lomas Salmonte, *Historia de Roma* [2004], 6; my translation), and surely some part of Cicero’s theory of the *civitas* deserved particular attention in this argument, whatever its debt may be to the Greek philosophical past. Most important, though, is what happened to the *civitas* when Rome outgrew the *polis* model and became a territorial monarchy, in the form of the Roman Empire, under Augustus and his successors, a radical transformation that defied *polis*-organization and ended in an age with complicated transformative notions—for good or ill—of a *civitas Dei*.

There are other oddities too. For example, in a list of six Roman names that occur in Etruscan inscriptions, Nagle gives the Latin forms for, or comments on, every one of them except Tita Vendia, perhaps the most interesting of all. Thus, Rutile Hippocrates is highlighted as a composite Greek and Roman name (= Rutilius Hippokrates), but nothing is said about the noteworthy Tita Vendia, who is the only woman in the list, and whose name already is in Latin. She is named in a Latin inscription of Etruscan origin, and this occurrence well *may* be the earliest attestation of a Roman woman’s two-part Latin onomastic.

The traditional myths and legends of early Rome are problematic for anyone to analyze. Nagle aligns with the modern skeptical critical tradition, which stretches back more than two and three-quarter centuries at least to Louis de Beaufort’s *Dissertation sur l’incertitude des cinq premiers siècles de l’histoire romaine* (1738), and which denies credibility in whole or in large part to the inherited narratives of Rome’s origins and early history. Nagle cannot decide between the tradition that L. Junius Brutus led a coup to expel Tarquin the Proud and the alternative that the outsider Porsenna may have been responsible for the overthrow of the monarchy. “The trouble is that there is little in the historical record to put in place of these two traditions” (36), but how does the student even decide whether to agree with him? It is the historian’s function to explain historical developments based on the evidence, and these legends are evidence. Nagle sug-

gests, somewhat unsatisfactorily, that the reader be content here “with an application of Aristotle’s generalizing version of the evolution of the early Greek *polis*” (36).

Balancing political theory with historical realities is tricky business. Aristotle’s theory of the *polis* is helpful, but, as Nagle knows, the Mediterranean *polis* evolved much earlier in the Near East and its conceptualization was advanced by the Greeks. It would be helpful for the reader to know something about the Mesopotamian and Semitic roots of the Phoenician *qart* as historical predecessor of the *polis*, especially in light of the role that Qart-Hadasht (Carthage) had both in its own disastrous conflict with Rome and in long-range North African urbanization in general. Aristotle admired the Carthaginian polity, but he distorted it through the lens of Greek political theory, much as Polybius also did later in explaining the Roman constitution to his fellow Greeks.

Historians, including Nagle, still use the legends of early Rome to distill and characterize developments in the first century and a half of the Republic; at the very least these fictive narratives are themselves an important part of Roman history. Our students deserve to consider this evidentiary material in its undigested, received form; then they can begin to understand for themselves how these legends function within their own traditional framework as well as in modern historical interpretation. The foundation myths about the fratricide of Remus, the rape of the Sabine women, the rape of Lucretia, or the competing stories of how the *lucus Curtius* came into existence, to name a few, illustrate significant aspects of early Roman society and also the way later Roman writers embedded their cultural values in narrating—and reconstituting—their own early history.

As Nagle notes, “most agree that the social problems of the later Republic (from about 150 BC to 30 BC) have been projected backward into accounts of fifth and fourth centuries BC Rome, thus contaminating the accounts of the earlier struggles” (73), but any historical account of the early conflict of the orders—and he offers one, of course—depends on the same legend-building mentality of much later Roman writers that drives the other legends and historical accounts of early Rome, which he disdains. Many Roman historians today, perhaps even the majority, believe that Roman legends contain at least a kernel of historicity, and the course for which this book is designed ought to be the place where students begin to dissect and hash out these inherited narratives.

Many touches give the impression of an up-to-date approach, such as the helpful use of graphs, percentages, and modern political terminology. Some of the terminology is striking—Gaels for Gauls or Celts (all three terms are sprin-

kled in the text) or the incidental revisionist perspective on a point of Greek history that “the great Peloponnesian War raged in two phases from 460 to 446 BC and from 431 to 404 BC” (37), granted that his initial phase is the so-called “first” Peloponnesian war, which was undeclared and is itself an invention of modern historiography.

There are, or should be, limits too, like the risk of trivialization when Rome’s ability to transform its “generic *polis*-format . . . into a hybrid form of *polis*” is characterized as “its killer app” (64). “Romanization” is introduced without a definition (55) and is used throughout as if the influence is exclusively from the top down, though most recent scholarship tends to emphasize the process as a two-way street.

This book is argued powerfully, but caution obviously is needed. At first it feels refreshing to see the designation Middle East (or Mid-East), which is familiar to modern ears and eyes, as a substitute for Near East, which is itself a term familiar to archaeologists and ancient historians but not to the general public. A moment’s reflection, however, shows that, in fact, these terms are neither co-extensive nor academically interchangeable despite some modern carelessness in this regard. A more geographically accurate modernization of the term Near East might be Western Asia, as some scholars urge.<sup>1</sup>

The publisher owed this book a much better copy-edit than it received. True enough, the multiple formatting errors and numerous comma inconsistencies in the list of suggested readings will not deter readers. Much more serious, though, is the fact that literally every single chapter contains conspicuous typographical and/or editorial errors. The First Samnite War 343–341 BC is discussed as such in the text but omitted from the boxed “Chronology: Wars of the Republic I” (40), which lists the dates of the second and third Samnite wars. The dates of the Social War are given four times, twice as 90–88 BC (199, 232) and twice as 91–89 BC (146, 199 [sic]), thus both reflecting and obscuring certain legitimate chronological questions tied to the events of the war; and likewise the dates of Caesar’s Gallic War are specified as 58–52 BC (211) and then as 58–50 (219).

<sup>1</sup> The modern term Middle-East (Mid-East) was invented by Admiral Alfred Mahan in 1902, based on latitude, not longitude. As a result, the term “Near East” leaves out the southernmost latitudes included in “Middle-East,” and likewise “Middle-East” excludes the northernmost latitudes of the “Near East.” Because of the spread of Islamic culture, “Middle-East” today often includes, at least informally, the Maghreb, that is, North Africa west of Egypt and above the Sahara).

Even more striking are the typos “Catalina,” which appears both in a bolded heading and in the index (215, 467), and “Iliythia” (101) for the orthographically challenging Ilithyia, which is the Latin transliteration of the linguistically curious name Eileithyia—Indo-European or not?—for the Greek goddess of childbirth. In one recent graduate seminar, non-specialist history students were distracted by these copy-editing errors, and the sheer number of them prevents me from assigning this book to my undergraduates. The seminar students planning to specialize in Roman history were taken aback by the long chronological framework in individual, relatively brief chapters (for example, chapter 11, from the death of Sulla to the cultural and political wake following the battle of Actium) and the losses that this practice entailed.

In tribute to at least the last half-century of historical research, comprehensive textbooks on Roman history now lay greater emphasis on Late Antiquity. Mary T. Boatwright *et alii* (*The Romans from Village to Empire*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2012) have strengthened their account down to AD 476, which they accept as the symbolic end of the empire in the West and the effective end of their own narrative. However, they also recognize the more significant fact that “Rome’ continued to live on in the East long after 476” (518) and comment on the growth of the Byzantine empire between AD 408 and 491. David Potter (*Ancient Rome: A New History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2014), finding the question of Rome’s fall heuristically useful, takes his narrative down to the virtual annihilation of the Roman (read Byzantine) army at the battle of Yarmuk in AD 636 and settles on 17 September AD 642 as the definitive date for the fall of the empire in the East, when the Roman garrison abandoned Alexandria in disgrace after Arab armies had occupied first Syria, then Egypt. Potter also gives an account of Eastern emperors and Western kings AD 408–527 and of Justinian’s vision AD 527–565, as well as the post-Justinian world of Heraclius and Umar AD 565–642.

Nagle notes that in the West the administration of the empire ended in AD 476 when Odoacer “returned the imperial insignia to Constantinople” (421), and he gives attention to the Slavs and the Eastern Roman (or Byzantine) Empire and also to Islam and the transformation of the Mediterranean. He rephrases the old chestnut about the fall of the Roman Empire (437): “Why did the west fall and not the east? How did the Eastern Empire, or at least some of it, manage to survive a further 1000 years after the collapse of Roman rule in the west? Were not both portions of the Empire subject to the same internal and external forces?” His own point of view is that the real fall of the Roman Empire occurred with the breakup of Mediterranean unity. Nagle carries the story of post-imperial rule,

effectively in both East and West, down to AD 732 when “the advance of Muslim armies was finally stopped in southern France by the Germanic Franks at the battle of Poitiers (or Tours) . . .” (435). (It has to be noted that Nagle’s choice of a virtual end date evinces a clear occidental perspective and may reflect today’s ideological, political, and religious conflicts between radical Islam and the West.) For previous generations of teachers, though, one fruitful topic in classroom discussions used to concern when the Roman Empire fell (in the West), it looks as if the new teaching questions will focus on when the Late Roman Empire fell or, more likely, when and how it became, in the fullest sense, the Byzantine Empire and what that means.

Nagle does argue powerfully, as noted above, for his vision of Roman history, but his approach raises a number of concomitant didactic issues that he does not seem to notice. That said, the strength of this book depends on Nagle’s argument and his ability to justify the institutional framework on which he hangs (a) Rome’s success in developing an empire based on maintaining, redesigning, and transforming the Mediterranean *polis* structure when other states had failed in that attempt; (b) the collapse of the republican government after it had dominated most of the Mediterranean and much of Europe; (c) the republic’s revival and re-creation of itself, if that is what it was, after this collapse; and (d) Rome’s final transformation of itself in the fourth century AD under pressure from the Sasanian empire, various warrior bands, and migrating peoples in the West. The concluding chapter ends with an interesting and informative coda that allows students to skim through the origins of Islam and the classical inheritance of East and West up until the eighth century and a little after. This is, then, an important textbook, which offers a serious alternative to a more conventional, and now old-fashioned, narrative of Roman history, but *caveat emptor*.

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