

BOOK REVIEW

Roman Political Thought: From Cicero to Augustine. By DEAN HAMMER. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xvii + 555. Hardcover, \$90.00. ISBN 978-0-521-19524-9.

Roman political thought has often been neglected and considered second rate, at best, in comparison to Greek political thought. Strange that it should be so, given that the Romans are often deemed first-rate in their political achievements. The Framers of the U.S. Constitution frequently turned to the Romans, only occasionally to the Greeks. Nonetheless, the notion still stands that Roman political thought is merely derivative and descriptive. Hammer's weighty volume is out to change this perspective by "arguing that the Romans were engaged in a wide-ranging and penetrating reflection on the meaning of their political existence" (3). If Hammer's *Roman Political Thought* does not persuade every reader of the Romans' political perspicacity, it at least stands as a challenge to those who would deny the Roman contribution to political thought.

Hammer has produced a quite learned book on a wide variety of writers, nine *in toto* including the usual suspects, Cicero, Sallust, and Seneca, and some typically not considered political writers. A few of the best chapters are on those who fall into the latter category, such as Lucretius, Vergil, and Marcus Aurelius. It is one thing to examine the role of politics in a work like the *Aeneid*, common enough, or *De Rerum Natura*; it is quite another to read Vergil and Lucretius as political thinkers. The task of surveying the vast bibliography for this wide array of writers alone is quite an achievement, and Hammer does a nice job of providing good overviews of the research on each writer. The book comprises an introduction and nine succeeding chapters taking on each political thinker chronologically.

Hammer's work succeeds on a number of levels. First, he provides a fine resource for those who want to examine the nature of Roman political thought. I imagine most who pick up this work will turn to a particular chapter to learn more about a chosen author. Second, this work is not simply a survey of various Roman authors, but rather an in-depth analysis of significant writers. Hammer

goes beyond offering a summation of each author's political thought and presents new ways of interpretation, which is needed at times given the narrow political readings previously applied to many of the authors. The chapter on Marcus Aurelius stands out in this regard as Hammer argues that in contrast "to interpretations of Marcus' thought as reflecting loneliness and isolation, his *Meditations* seek to join us with others, recognizing in them a fellowship, as we are joined with ourselves, overcoming our own alienation" (381).

There are a number of risks to Hammer's approach. The book reads rather episodically, since each chapter virtually stands alone—good for those interested in a certain author, but less helpful for those seeking to understand Roman political thought in a comprehensive way, which this work, given its heft, seems intended to do. In the closing of the chapter on Augustine, Hammer does attempt to trace through the writings of Augustine some of the overarching themes of Roman political thought. This succeeds in the context of Augustine, but is less satisfying for the work as a whole. In addition, those chapters in which Hammer takes a particular perspective on a writer may miss some important points. The chapter on Tacitus comes to mind in this regard. Hammer analyzes Tacitus chiefly as a writer of the psychology of despotism, which very well may be the most correct interpretation of Tacitus, but he adds very little about Tacitus' thoughts on *libertas*, which, if more nuanced, are no less significant than his thoughts on despotism, nor are they merely the inversion of his critique of *dominatio*.

There are a number of errata throughout, varying from spelling mistakes to omission of bibliographic citation. While these do not undermine the overall quality of the work, the latter are frustrating at times when the reader would like to trace an idea to its scholarly source.

Critiques aside, this is a valuable book for multiple reasons: as a resource for students and scholars of political thought, as a synthesis of previous interpretations and as original scholarship on Roman writers, and lastly as an argument for taking Roman political thought seriously, perhaps its most important contribution.

THOMAS E. STRUNK

Xavier University, strunkt@xavier.edu