

BOOK REVIEW

Cato the Younger: Life and Death at the End of the Roman Republic. By FRED K. DROGULA. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. xix + 350. Hardback, \$35.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-086902-1.

Although most would agree that Cato the Younger (henceforth Cato) played a pivotal role in the political life of the Late Republic, English speaking scholars did not produce a biography of Cato until this monograph by Fred Drogula (henceforth Drogula).¹ That Cato had to wait so long for a single-author monograph is surprising in some ways, given that the ancients did not hesitate to write about him in numerous genres including biography. Yet because of the nature of these ancient writings, many either hagiographic or polemical, reconstructing the biography of Cato is a thorny matter. Drogula has navigated through these difficulties to produce an excellent work of scholarship that will be of much use to scholars and students.

Drogula proceeds methodically and chronologically through Cato's life. He begins the Introduction with one of the major themes of the book – Cato's impressive political authority did not come from the typical sources of wealth, office, or even direct familial connections, but from Cato's "deft manipulation of tradition (2)." Cato relied on the authority of his great-grandfather Cato the Elder to establish his reputation as a traditionalist. Drogula is quick to point out, however, that tradition for Cato simply meant his interpretation of the *mos maiorum*, for at times he acted in ways that ran contrary to tradition, even his great-grandfather's legacy. For Drogula, a significant way that Cato strayed from the Roman political tradition was in his unwillingness to compromise, as evidenced

¹ There is of course the biography in German by Rudolf Fehrlé, *Cato Uticensis*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983, and in English the popularizing book by Rob Goodman and Jimmy Soni, *Rome's Last Citizen: The Life and Legacy of Cato, Mortal Enemy of Caesar*, New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2012.

by his frequent use of the filibuster throughout his career.² A second major point Drogula is keen to argue is that Cato was not inspired so much by Stoic philosophy, as is commonly posited, but by the Roman political tradition. He writes at the end of the Introduction, “[Cato] was not a Greek philosopher, but a thoroughly Roman aristocrat who strove to save his own idea of the Republic (8).” This sentence sums up much of Drogula’s thesis for the remainder of the book.

The first two chapters focus on Cato’s family and his early life up to his candidacy for tribune of the plebs in 64 BCE. These chapters provide a strong background for understanding Cato’s life. Drogula explores the heart of Cato’s political career over the next six chapters. The Epilogue, entitled “Cato the Stoic,” is an important conclusion to Drogula’s work and a necessary component for the study of Cato, who arguably accomplished as much in his afterlife as in his actual life. Drogula explores the reception of Cato up through the early Christian writers, demonstrating that the idea of Cato as a Stoic is a myth developed by later writers eager to use him for their own literary and political purposes. The earliest example of this comes from his contemporary Cicero, who in his *Pro Murena* presents Cato as a caricature of a Stoic for his rhetorical needs. The myth grew from there until the early Christian writers found Cato’s suicide immoral.

Throughout, Drogula maintains a critical perspective to Cato’s life and political behavior. This is necessary given much of the historiographical tradition. One example of this approach concerns Cato’s financial dealings with Cyprus. Though it is not certain that Cato did anything mischievous, Drogula raises legitimate concerns that our sources seem to want to cover up (164-67). There are times when Drogula assigns too much responsibility to Cato for political eventualities. This comes to the fore primarily in Cato’s dealings with Caesar, who often comes across as a passive victim in the analysis of the formation of the First Triumvirate and the final years of the Roman Republic. One could hardly think of a figure from Western history who more embodies agency than Caesar, and yet Drogula frequently depicts Caesar as being backed into a corner by Cato and having no other choice but to join with Pompey and Crassus (123-27) or to cross the Rubicon (254-69). Frequently overlooked is that Caesar had already worked closely with both Pompey and Crassus before 60 BCE. That Caesar would turn to them rather than Cato and the Optimates is perfectly in keeping

² This is an approach that contrasts a good bit from Kit Morrell’s book *Pompey, Cato, and the Governance of the Roman Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, which highlights Cato’s willingness to work with one-time opponents to formulate policy.

with Caesar's career up to that point. This interpretation of Cato and Caesar is generally accepted and has its roots in our earliest sources, so Drogula is not out of the mainstream on this point, but it is a point which needs some deconstructing.

Such critiques aside, Drogula has produced a fine work of scholarship. Drogula's book is well edited and largely error free, well written and engaging to read. Scholarship strives to be definitive and, perhaps paradoxically, to generate further conversation on the topic. Drogula achieves both of these aims to a great degree. This is not the last word on Cato, and that is a testament to Drogula's accomplishment.

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