

BOOK REVIEW

Rome, Blood, and Power: Reform, Murder, and Popular Politics in the Late Republic 70-27 BC. By GARETH C. SAMPSON. Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2019. Pp. xxi + 338. Hardback, \$34.95. ISBN: 978-1-5267-1017-8.

Rome, *Blood and Power* offers a new narrative of the Late Republic focusing on stability and conflict within the city of Rome in the era of Pompey and Caesar. Contrary to the subtitle of the book, the narrative truly begins in 133 with Tiberius Gracchus and with Sampson discussing the political controversies predating Sulla with almost as much detail as the controversies more at the heart of the narrative. This gives the main narrative a strong foundation, but also demonstrates a potential issue of focus.

The book is divided into four parts with an introductory chapter and a concluding chapter. Part 1 covers 146 – 70 BCE in one whirlwind chapter detailing the provocative tribunes of the period, like the Gracchi and Saturninus and ending with Pompey and Crassus's consulship. The next part covers 70 – 59; Part 3 covers up to 49 and Part 4 ends in 30 after Octavian returns from Egypt. The conclusion reviews Augustus's career to his death. The narrative is punctuated by three civil wars: 91 – 71, 63 – 62 and 49 – 31, as he dates them. This is a fresh division of the narrative but it is hard to justify the inclusion of Catiline's rebellion with the other two. His division also overlooks the phases of these conflicts although he clearly explains them in the narrative.

Sampson reveals his focus in the introduction of the book: stability. He will evaluate the Late Republic based on how stable the political system was after Pompey and Crassus's first consulship. The major issue, as Sampson sees it, is the tribunate of the Plebs. Therefore, his book dwells often on the tribunes and the various bills they propose in an almost annalistic manner. Chapters are divided by year, focusing on the specific magistrates for those years, with an appendix in the back listing every tribune by year.

While other historians discuss tribunes and their legislation in the Late Republic, they truly are the focus of Sampson's narrative for most of the book, but his approach to the larger narrative sours the focus. The tribunes never act alone, as they are always linked to the powerful men who truly lead Rome: Pompey or

Crassus. Sometimes the link is adversarial, but they are always strongly connected to non-tribunes. In some ways this narrative is reminiscent of Syme, where each of the powerful men of Rome had a hold over the lesser officials of the city.¹

Indeed, despite the focus on tribunes, much of the sweeping change he discusses was caused by consuls. Even the divisions of the book are based around the actions of consuls, not tribunes. These consulships are presented as attempts by Crassus and Pompey to maintain the stability of a Republic they restored in 70 BCE. It is, however, unclear how stability is evaluated. Caesar's consulship does not seem stabilizing, nor were his actions a response to the tribunes of his year or years before. Pompey's sole consulship is presented as a judicial cleansing of political extremists from the city without discussing the role those political exiles played in Caesar's camp. It strikes me that these consuls were every bit as destabilizing as the tribunes and rarely responded to them. Sampson does not give a strong reason to blame tribunes more than consuls. After the death of Clodius, tribunes take a back seat to the developing civil war until Augustus's career where his tribunician powers are discussed as one of the twin pillars of his success (the other being military control).

The book does a commendable job at focusing on the city of Rome. Instead of following the major powerholders on their adventures outside the city, they essentially disappear. Pompey has little room in the narrative of Cicero's consulship and Caesar even less while in Gaul (the only exception being the Conference at Luca). The importance of Rome is revealed leading to Caesar's war with Pompey and for the second triumvirate: the man who controlled Rome gained legitimacy. Pompey and, later, Augustus found a way to remain in Rome without sacrificing their military control. Sampson fails to discuss Caesar's attempts to remain a strong force in Rome by publishing his commentary, supporting political campaigns and meeting with politicians in Cisalpine Gaul. The author also misses an opportunity to either add nuance to his claim or further highlight how irreplaceable proximity was. While the focus is squarely on the city of Rome, it is even further limited to Rome's elite. The will and lives of the people and the soldiers are rarely addressed despite the focus on "popular politics."

I find it difficult to recommend this book. Scholars will be unsatisfied with Sampson's style and his reliance on Dio, Plutarch and Appian when there are so many contemporary Roman sources he could be quoting. There are also some

¹ Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939).

odd claims. Sampson claims that the Consular Tribunes from the 4th century were Tribunes of the Plebs and argues that the tribunes might have usurped that power again in 53 based on one mention by Dio. He takes the Donation of Alexandria to be a sincere attempt by Antony to divide the East between his heirs. He argues that Augustus's rule was practically invisible to Romans because the officials of the Republic remained in place.

A more general or student audience might have more to gain from this book. Sampson helps his readers by repeating introductions of historical figures (though this might prove confusing as well) and offers background information in a way that is sometimes too repetitive. The annalistic narrative might also prove stilted for a general reader.

Sampson has a promising focus on stability, the tribunes and the city of Rome but fails to create a cultivating narrative.

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