

Christian Meier, *Die Ohnmacht des allmächtigen Dictators Caesar: Drei biographische Skizzen*, 2nd rev. edn. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2015, 274 pp, ISBN 3518110381.

This book, whose first edition appeared in 1980, purports to be about the ‘impotence’ of Caesar as Rome’s ‘almighty’ or ‘all-powerful’ dictator. But the book is not about limitations or impediments to Caesar’s power as much as his failure to find a solution to the disintegrating Republic, so that at his death a new round of civil wars began because the *nobiles* proved unable to re-establish their collective rule over the state by winning back the confidence or compliance of vital interest groups, such as the army, the Roman people, the Italians, and the provincial elite. A book about such limitations to Caesar’s absolute rule would have been interesting, and stimulating, even if it confined itself to political matters, but instead we have a re-statement of the author’s long-held position on the ‘fall’ of the Roman Republic, though this time for a wider-than-academic readership, who would presumably appreciate the magisterial narrative unimpeded by footnotes and bibliography. The original academic monograph from which this book springs is Meier’s widely used *Res Publica amissa: eine Studie zu Verfassung und Geschichte der späten römischen Republik* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1966).

Meier believes that the late Republic was a time of ‘crisis with no alternative’ – an idea repeated regularly throughout the book under review. In other words, the *nobiles* could think of no real alternative to the traditional Republic, and certainly did not work towards one, so that the inevitable outcome was the Roman Empire or rule by an emperor. But were the *nobiles* the fount of all initiative? Were the poor basically content with their lot? Did socio-economic processes play no part? And if an emperor was inevitable, why did the absolute dictatorship of Caesar fail, especially when writers such as Suetonius saw a political progression not from Augustus, but from Caesar to the later emperors? There had been wide-ranging reform programmes devised and promoted before (e.g. by Gaius Gracchus, Sulla, Pompey), and Caesar himself certainly devised and put into motion a raft of reforms. There were impediments, however, to the reach of his power, and to his capacity to bring about fundamental reform. At different times his measures were resisted by senators, elements of the Roman people, Italians, provincials, and even his own soldiers. This is what I thought the book might be about, providing some recent thoughts on old criticisms or perhaps extending the argument into the realm of limitations that might explain Caesar’s failure to come up with an answer to the ‘crisis with no alternative’.

Instead, following an Introduction (9–16), the book is arranged into three biographical sketches. The first examines Caesar (17–106, ‘Die Ohnmacht des allmächtigen Dictators Caesar’), and the remaining two are concerned respectively with Cicero (107–210, ‘Das erfolgreiche Scheitern des Neulings in den alten Republik’) and Augustus (211–74, ‘Die Begründung der Monarchie als Wiederherstellung der Republik’). The sketches of Caesar and Cicero are each

punctuated by discussions of Roman politics and political institutions (41–52, 123–126), with the emphasis being on failure, largely a structural failure. Even if the focus were to remain on politics, each sketch might have delved more deeply into political culture, viz. the ideas, traditions and rituals which attended the practice of politics at Rome. The illuminating narrative of Augustus' rise to power has a more positive air about it, with heavy emphasis on the events of 36 BC and their importance for the eventual success of the future *princeps* (233–238). Augustus, aided greatly by the demise of many *nobiles* in the ongoing civil wars, was successful in finding the alternative to the traditional Republic – in what was paradoxically proclaimed the *res publica restituta* (213–214).

In conclusion, then, there is likely to be some disappointment for the academic reader in this book, but considerable value for the general reader, especially one who seeks a reliable, thoughtful account of the rise of Augustus. Even this type of reader, however, might wonder at the appropriateness of the book's title for the account which is contained within its 274 pages.

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