

**David Potter, *The Origin of Empire: Rome from the Republic to Hadrian.*** Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2019. Pp. x + 418. ISBN 978-0-674-65967-4.

This book, which is aimed at a general audience, provides a detailed narrative of Roman history from 264 BC to AD 138. The narrative is interspersed with digressions giving factual data on political and administrative institutions, military organization, the economy, and literature. Reflections on the deep forces driving the story being told are confined to short asides. Some of these are certainly intriguing. For instance, Potter adopts language used to describe early modern states by Charles Tilly and others, hinting that in the late Republic, Rome became a ‘fiscal-military state’ (327, cf. 154, 186, 237, 407), characterized both by a powerful ‘contractor’ class involved in tax collection and military outfitting (11–12, 140–1, 144–7, 166, 189), and by the privatization of governmental resources (112, 192) – resources that eventually funded civil-war armies (199). But the book’s format means that such ideas cannot be given full and systematic exposition.

It was evidently decided not to burden the reader by rehearsing major scholarly controversies, so the uninitiated will finish the book ignorant of these. There is little hint, for instance, of the debates about the motivations for Roman imperial expansion and the importance of popular participation in Republican politics. One can see the rationale: bickering professors are apt to repel a general audience. Readers will, however, be left with the impression that our knowledge of Roman history is more stable than it is. The author does sometimes alert his readers when ancient sources give distorted and partisan accounts (e.g. 17–18, 63, 185, 246–7) – although we are never left in doubt about the modern expert’s ability to set the record straight.

The book is written in prose that is precise and plain – perhaps relentlessly so. It may be aimed at a general audience, but not at the casual reader. It will appeal to those wanting a basic outline of Roman history, presented without self-indulgent literary flourishes and bumptious gags. Not that the work is entirely humourless: the author delights in drawing wry parallels between ancient events and episodes in post-war American history, with notorious contemporary slogans sometimes being repurposed. Ravishing a conquered territory, as Hannibal did in 217 BC, is ‘not ordinarily a good way of winning hearts and minds’ (61). Rumours about Nero’s incendiarism in AD 64 illustrate how ‘fake news can become real news’ (363, cf. 367). The administrative developments of the early Principate ‘occasionally offer lessons in the ways that narcissistic, bullying chief executives with short attention spans and bad tempers could be managed’ (12; other examples: 104, 107, 125, 348, 350).

As this last statement makes clear, Potter flirts with the notion that Rome has lessons for modern America. There is no crude didacticism, but readers are certainly

led in the direction of particular conclusions – especially readers who already believe that Antiquity’s last superpower has lessons for history’s most recent. Aside from comments about the value of a competent, independent civil service if a polity is captured by an inept and unpleasant man-child (cf. 321–2, 337, 339, 359), we are apparently invited to see the fall of the Republic as a lesson in what happens when elite competition becomes dysfunctional (400–1, cf. 178). Indeed, the final, ominous sentence of the book is Tacitus’ statement that imperial success breeds destructive internal competition in a state (*Hist.* 2.38). Potter also stresses that the integration of foreigners into its system of governance was the secret to the Roman empire’s success (346) – a clear shot at those who would build walls, both literal and figurative.

The sentiments here are wise and deeply decent, although one does wonder whether Potter has perhaps cast the story in a way that reduces their impact. When it comes to the incorporation of foreigners, he emphasizes the fact that the Roman imperial administration made good use of talented members of the elites of conquered regions (1, 11–12, 92, 388, 399–400). This could be read not as an argument for welcoming the world’s huddled masses, but rather a coldly pragmatic suggestion that subsequent stages of imperial domination and exploitation can be made more efficient by creaming off talent from populations already subjugated. The decision to end the book with the death of Hadrian and a glimpse forward to the principates of Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius – i.e. in an age of stable and intellectually serious emperors – also has interesting implications. On the one hand, it strengthens the impression that a state can be kept on an even keel by quiet, efficient civil servants: notwithstanding some bouts of poor leadership in the first century, the empire weathered the storm and reached the golden age of the second. Things would have looked very different had the book ended with the murder of Severus Alexander and the ensuing chaos. On the other hand, if we end with the image (fantasy?) of the benevolent autocrat, could this not seem to be an acceptable alternative to the internecine strife of the Republican elite? If the political classes in a state become incapable of effective government, might not the long and happy years of Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius suggest that strongman rule is preferable to a dysfunctional Republic – provided one can find the right sort of extremely stable genius?

One hopes that readers will not draw such conclusions, and the author certainly does not intend them. But this is the difficulty with domesticating Antiquity and turning it into a useful past: it has a habit of slipping the leash and doing all manner of embarrassing things.

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