

Stefan G. Chrissanthos, *The Year of Julius and Caesar: 59 BC and the Transformation of the Roman Republic*. Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 2019. Pb. US\$19.95.

In this short, lively introduction to the events of 59 (58 too, the book's title notwithstanding) and their importance for understanding the collapse of the Roman republic, Chrissanthos emphasises the intransigence and social irresponsibility of Cato, Bibulus, and other members of the senate who are here bundled together under the rubric *optimates*. Caesar was ambitious, to be sure, but his adversaries, through their fierce opposition to the agrarian law which he advanced on Pompey's behalf, entrained a sequence of conflicts that, in this telling of the tale, ushered in the crises of 52 and 49 – after which the republic was violently replaced by autocracy 'and freedom vanished from the western world for more than a thousand years' (p. 101). This is serious stuff. But Chrissanthos' narrative, consistently lucid, is never grim.

This is a book for students in the schools or university students sitting elective courses in Roman history – as well as what used to be denominated the Educated General Reader. Chrissanthos endeavours to explain everything that is pertinent to the story he has to tell, from Roman social structure to the operations of the constitution, and he is routinely illuminating. He is superb on the topography of the city and how Roman spaces shape Roman political life. Readers will find valuable assistance in helpful maps, a useful chronological table, a detailed cast of characters, and an equally detailed glossary of all technical expressions. For the curious or conscientious Chrissanthos supplies notes to primary and some secondary sources and a selective but excellent list of further readings. And there is an index.

Chrissanthos interprets the events of 59 by way of a highly traditional, one could even say old-fashioned, version of the friction between *optimates* and *populares*. This is the tension that animates his narrative and consequently renders Cato and his ilk socially insensitive reactionaries. Which doubtless they were, but newcomers might benefit from a more nuanced discussion of the various principles, not all of them attractive to a modern reader, which influenced these figures. By contrast, the varying motives of Caesar and the supporters of his agrarian law are laid out clearly. Still, issues of economic equity and political ambition tend to occlude other aspects of conflict between Caesar and his optimate opponents. Which is why, if they were told, many readers could only be astonished to learn that in the elections for 59 there were many voters who cast ballots for Caesar *and* for Bibulus – two men who had been magisterial colleagues the whole of their careers. The fabric of civic life was complicated, and Chrissanthos is hardly to be blamed for being selective. But this version of events is perhaps overly selective at the thematic level. Doubtless this will give teachers who use this book something to discuss with their students.

The narrative is constantly enlivened by the author's inclusion of the realia of daily life – and this feature of the book is an engaging one. True, the author at times inclines to what one might deem overly imaginative reconstruction, but the payoff is

worth it: no student will be bored. One may always quibble with bits and pieces of any book. Chrissanthos mentions 'consular *intercessio*' (p. 6; cf. p. 4), but it is far from clear that such a thing existed (Mommsen, *StR* 1.286, n.1; A. Lintott, *The Constitution of the Roman Republic* (Oxford 1991), 100f.). I would not describe *lictors* as bodyguards (p. 6), nor do I believe that Plut. *Cat. min.* 6 justifies the expression 'the hard-drinking Cato' (p. 23). I doubt that by 62 Crassus was any longer 'Rome's wealthiest man' (p. 2). And it is quaint nowadays to come across the phrase 'the known world' (p. 1). But these are unimportant matters.

More serious, however: when Chrissanthos discusses the religious controversy between Bibulus and Caesar, a matter crucial to any understanding of the conflict between them, he collapses the distinction between *servatio de caelo* and *obnuntiatio*. This elision, admittedly all too common in treatments of 59, occludes what lay at the heart of the controversy over Caesar's legislation in 59 and thereafter (see, e.g., J. Linderski, *Roman Questions: Selected Papers* (Stuttgart 1995), 73f.). The issue is nuanced, and even among the Romans there was disagreement. Nevertheless, this controversy was fundamental to the events Chrissanthos endeavours to explain.

But let's not end on a negative note. I enjoyed reading this little book and am convinced students will find it fascinating. Without even a whiff of ponderousness, it delves into important aspects of an important moment in Roman history. And it is remarkably affordable. Author and press are to be commended.

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