

Luca Fezzi, *Crossing the Rubicon: Caesar's Decision and the Fate of Rome*. Translated from Italian by Richard Dixon. Yale University Press, 2019. 978-0-300-24145-7. \$35 USD

Caesar's estuary crossing and subsequent march on Rome is a particularly famous event of Roman history, an action that features prominently in defining Caesar as a historical figure. While this event does lie at the heart of this book, Luca Fezzi's temporal scope is, in fact, much wider than the winter and spring of 49: to Fezzi, Caesar's march on Rome, and Pompey's flight from the city exist as the culmination of a series of events in the preceding decades: thus the author indirectly casts Caesar and Pompey more as symptoms of a wider historical phenomenon rather than as instigators of one particular phase of civil war. In so doing, Fezzi proffers a more clearly focused thesis than one normally finds in books directed towards a non-specialist reader.

The first chapter reveals that the Roman history enthusiast is the primary audience for this book: Fezzi begins with a general survey of Roman culture, sketching the basic ideas of the Republic and the city of Rome, situating the latter as a place that very occasionally faces military assault. Approximately half of the book – Chapters Two to Seven – examine key historical events in the half-century before Caesar and Pompey come to blows: some are obviously relevant (the alliance of Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus and Caesar's Gallic campaigns each receive a chapter), others perhaps less obviously so (the conspiracy of Catiline and the machinations of Clodius, for instance), as precursors of the events 'in that fateful year 49' – a phrase that recurs repeatedly, almost as a trigger warning. More broadly, Fezzi devotes three chapters to setting up Caesar's and Pompey's emergence as leading political actors, then three chapters on their preparing to do battle.

Having slow-marched the reader to the Rubicon, in Chapter Eight Fezzi pauses and reflects on the representation of Caesar's crossing in the plethora of primary sources that narrate it: Caesar's own account in his *Civil Wars* (appropriately) comes first, followed by the usual suspects. The chapter concludes with what to some will seem like an unnecessary garnish: the pre-modern and modern debate about the exact location of the river.

The remaining four chapters constitute a specially swift denouement: Chapter Nine addresses the environment leading to Pompey's decision to abandon Rome; Chapter Ten describes Pompey's march to Brundisium; Chapter Eleven describes Caesar's time in Rome; Chapter Twelve races through the rest of the civil war. Here one will observe a variation in the quality of the discussion: Chapter Nine, for instance, is useful in trying to sort out the chronology of January 49; and Chapter Ten effectively reveals the challenges in the ancient world of communicating during a fast-evolving (or rapidly deteriorating, depending on one's perspective) situation. Chapter Twelve, however, will appear superficial to most readers. It is surely a cruel tease to set up Caesar and Pompey as enemy combatants, only to skim so quickly over Dyrrachium

and Pharsalus (the latter gets less than one page), given that experiencing these two as great generals face-to-face would surely be highly desirable for the lay reader.

The book's strengths lie in two areas. The first is the reader-friendly style of Richard Dixon's translation (though the use of contractions will seem too casual a stylistic choice to some). Caesar would approve of the uncomplicated prose. The second, as noted above, is situating the ancient evidence front-and-centre in the discussion, not confining it primarily to an appendix on 'further reading' as is the practice in similar titles. Fezzi strikes the right balance in his handling of Caesar's *Civil War*: it is an invaluable front-row source, but not without problems. The use of Cicero's *Letters* is a particular highlight, especially in the final chapters (several chapters and sections within chapters begin with a reference to, or a quotation from, his correspondence), which positions Cicero as prescient witness to history. However, on a few occasions Fezzi perhaps leans too heavily on the sources, whereby the narrative appears as a weaving together of ancient authors' accounts rather than his own synthesis.

This book joins a crowded collection of Roman history titles for the lay reader, whether published under the aegis of an academic press (as here) or otherwise: the late Republic especially has been a popular topic over the past two decades, meaning that now there is *much* overlap (in viewing this book's entry on Amazon, for instance, several closely related titles appear in the recommendations section, interspersed with translations of the ancient authors upon whom Fezzi draws so heavily). In one sense this is a good – nay, splendid – thing, reflecting continuing interest in Roman history outside of the academy; that reader will enjoy and derive benefit from Fezzi's book. However, one may speculate that this market is close to the point of oversaturation, and perhaps publishers need to reflect on where this 'genre' can go from here.

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