

Lustrum

Robert Harris

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Map of Republican Rome by Reginald Piggott

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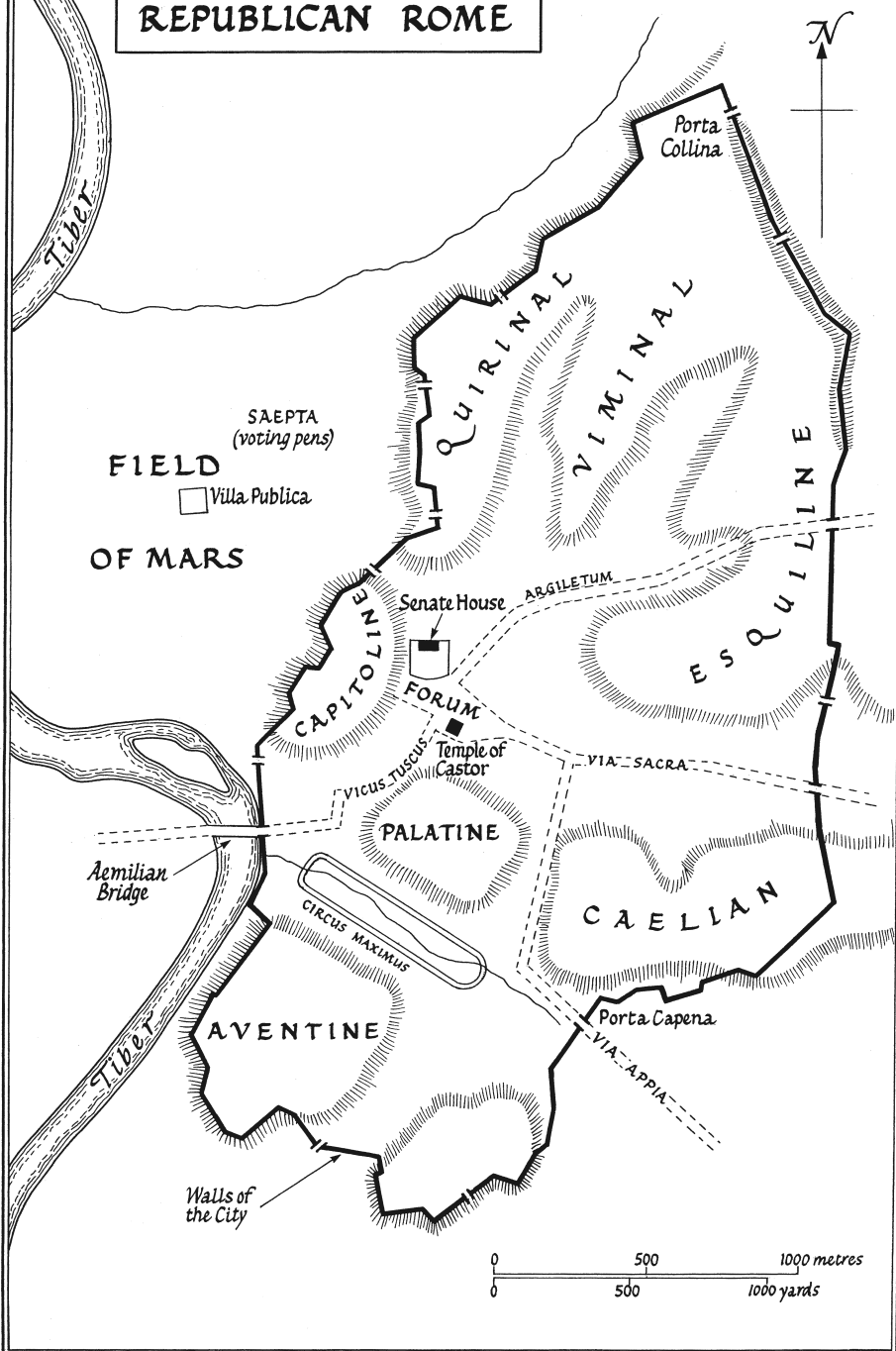
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

A few years before the birth of Christ, a biography of the Roman orator and statesman Cicero was produced by his former secretary, Tiro.

That there was such a man as Tiro, and that he wrote such a work, is well-attested. 'Your services to me are beyond count,' Cicero once wrote to him, 'in my home and out of it, in Rome and abroad, in my studies and literary work . . .' He was three years younger than his master, born a slave, but long outlived him, surviving – according to Saint Jerome – until he reached his hundredth year. Tiro was the first man to record a speech in the senate verbatim, and his shorthand system, known as *Notae Tironianae*, was still in use in the Church in the sixth century; indeed some traces of it (the symbol '&', the abbreviations etc, NB, i.e., e.g.) survive to this day. He also wrote several treatises on the development of Latin. His multi-volume life of Cicero is referred to as a source by the first-century historian Asconius Pedianus in his commentary on Cicero's speeches; Plutarch cites it twice. But, like the rest of Tiro's literary output, the book disappeared amid the collapse of the Roman Empire.

What kind of work it might have been still occasionally intrigues scholars. In 1985, Elizabeth Rawson, Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, speculated that it would probably have been in the Hellenistic tradition of biography – a literary form 'written in an unpretentious, unrhetorical style; it might quote

documents, but it liked apophthegms by its subject, and it could be gossip and irresponsible . . . It delighted in a subject's idiosyncrasies . . . Such biography was written not for statesmen and generals, but for what the Romans called *curiosi*.’*

That is the spirit in which I have approached the recreation of Tiro's vanished work. Although an earlier volume, *Imperium*, described Cicero's rise to power, it is not necessary, I hope, to read one in order to follow the other. This is a novel not a work of history: wherever the demands of the two have clashed, I have unhesitatingly given in to the former. Still, I have tried as far as possible to make the fiction accord with the facts, and also to use Cicero's actual words – of which, thanks in large part to Tiro, we have so many. I would like to thank Mr Fergus Fleming for generously giving me the title *Lustrum*. Readers wishing to clarify the political terminology of the Roman republic, or who would like to refer to a list of characters mentioned in the text, will find a glossary and *dramatis personae* at the end of the book.

R.H.

*Elizabeth Rawson, *Intellectual Life in the Late Roman Republic* (London 1985), pp 229–30.

‘We look on past ages with condescension, as a mere preparation for *us* . . . but what if we’re only an after-glow of *them*?’

J. G. Farrell, *The Siege of Krishnapur*

lustrum (1) in plur., *the den or lair of a wild beast*; (2) in plur., *brothels*; hence *debauchery*; (3) LIT., *an expiatory sacrifice*, esp. *that offered every five years by the censors*; TRANSF., *a period of five years, a lustrum*.

PART ONE

CONSUL

63 BC

*O condicionem miseram non modo administrandae verum etiam
conservandae rei publicae!*

The preservation of the republic no less than governing it
– what a thankless task it is!

Cicero, speech, 9 November 63 BC

I

Two days before the inauguration of Marcus Tullius Cicero as consul of Rome, the body of a child was pulled from the River Tiber, close to the boat sheds of the republican war fleet.

Such a discovery, though tragic, would not normally have warranted the attention of a consul-elect. But there was something so grotesque about this particular corpse, and so threatening to civic peace, that the magistrate responsible for keeping order in the city, C. Octavius, sent word to Cicero asking him to come at once.

Cicero at first was reluctant to go, pleading pressure of work. As the consular candidate who had topped the poll, it fell to him, rather than his colleague, to preside over the opening session of the senate, and he was writing his inaugural address. But I knew there was more to it than that. He had an unusual squeamishness about death. Even the killing of animals in the games disturbed him, and this weakness – for alas in politics a soft heart is always perceived as a weakness – had started to be noticed. His immediate instinct was to send me in his place.

‘Of course I shall go,’ I replied carefully. ‘But . . .’ I let my sentence trail away.

‘But?’ he said sharply. ‘But what? You think it will look bad?’

I held my tongue and continued transcribing his speech. The silence lengthened.

‘Oh, very well,’ he groaned at last. He heaved himself to his feet. ‘Octavius is a dull dog, but steady enough. He wouldn’t summon me unless it was important. In any case I need to clear my head.’

It was late December and from a dark grey sky blew a wind that was quick enough and sharp enough to steal your breath. Outside in the street a dozen petitioners were huddled, hoping for a word, and as soon as they saw the consul-elect stepping through his front door they ran across the road towards him. ‘Not now,’ I said, pushing them back. ‘Not today.’ Cicero threw the edge of his cloak over his shoulder, tucked his chin down on to his chest and set off briskly down the hill.

We must have walked about a mile, I suppose, crossing the forum at an angle and leaving the city by the river gate. The waters of the Tiber were fast and high, flexed by yellowish-brown whirlpools and writhing currents. Up ahead, opposite Tiber Island, amid the wharfs and cranes of the Navalvia, we could see a large crowd milling around. (You will get a sense of how long ago all this happened by the way – more than half a century – when I tell you that the Island was not yet linked by its bridges to either bank.) As we drew closer, many of the onlookers recognised Cicero, and there was a stir of curiosity as they parted to let us through. A cordon of legionaries from the marine barracks was protecting the scene. Octavius was waiting.

‘My apologies for disturbing you,’ said Octavius, shaking my master’s hand. ‘I know how busy you must be, so close to your inauguration.’

‘My dear Octavius, it is a pleasure to see you at any time. You know my secretary, Tiro?’

Octavius glanced at me without interest. Although he is remembered today only as the father of Augustus, he was at this time aedile of the plebs and very much the coming man. He would probably have made consul himself had he not died prematurely of a fever some four years after this encounter. He led us out of the wind and into one of the great military boat-houses, where the skeleton of a liburnian, stripped for repair, sat on huge wooden rollers. Next to it on the earth floor an object lay shrouded in sailcloth. Without pausing for ceremony, Octavius threw aside the material to show us the naked body of a boy.

He was about twelve, as I remember. His face was beautiful and serene, quite feminine in its delicacy, with traces of gold paint glinting on the nose and cheeks, and with a bit of red ribbon tied in his damp brown curls. His throat had been cut. His body had been slashed open all the way down to the groin and emptied of its organs. There was no blood, only that dark, elongated cavity, like a gutted fish, filled with river mud. How Cicero managed to contemplate the sight and maintain his composure, I do not know, but he swallowed hard and kept on looking. Eventually he said hoarsely, 'This is an outrage.'

'And that's not all,' said Octavius. He squatted on his haunches, took hold of the lad's skull between his hands and turned it to the left. As the head moved, the gaping wound in the neck opened and closed obscenely, as if it were a second mouth trying to whisper a warning to us. Octavius seemed entirely indifferent to this, but then of course he was a military man and no doubt used to such sights. He pulled back the hair to reveal a deep indentation just above the boy's right ear, and pressed his thumb into it. 'Do you see? It looks as if he was felled from behind. I'd say by a hammer.'

‘His face painted. His hair beribboned. Felled from behind by a hammer,’ repeated Cicero, his words slowing as he realised where his logic was leading him. ‘Then his throat cut. And finally his body . . . eviscerated.’

‘Exactly,’ said Octavius. ‘His killers must have wanted to inspect his entrails. He was a sacrifice – a human sacrifice.’

At those words, in that cold, dim place, the hairs on the nape of my neck stirred and spiked, and I knew myself to be in the presence of Evil – Evil as a palpable force, as potent as lightning.

Cicero said, ‘Are there any cults in the city you have heard of that might practise such an abomination?’

‘None. There are always the Gauls, of course – they are said to do such things. But there aren’t many of them in town at the moment, and those that are here are well behaved.’

‘And who is the victim? Has anyone claimed him?’

‘That’s another reason I wanted you to come and see for yourself.’ Octavius rolled the body over on to its stomach. ‘There’s a small owner’s tattoo just above his backside, do you see? Those who dumped the body may have missed it. “C.Ant.M.f.C.n.” Caius Antonius, son of Marcus, grandson of Caius. There’s a famous family for you! He was a slave of your consular colleague, Antonius Hybrida.’ He stood and wiped his hands on the sail-cloth, then casually threw the cover back over the body. ‘What do you want to do?’

Cicero was staring at the pathetic bundle on the floor as if mesmerised. ‘Who knows about this?’

‘Nobody.’

‘Hybrida?’

‘No.’

‘What about the crowd outside?’

‘There’s a rumour going round that there’s been some kind of ritual killing. You above all know what crowds are like. They’re saying it’s a bad omen on the eve of your consulship.’

‘They may be right.’

‘It’s been a hard winter. They could do with calming down. I thought we might send word to the College of Priests and ask them to perform some kind of ceremony of purification—’

‘No, no,’ said Cicero quickly, pulling his gaze away from the body. ‘No priests. Priests will only make it worse.’

‘So what shall we do?’

‘Tell no one else. Burn the remains as quickly as possible. Don’t let anyone see them. Forbid anyone who has seen them from disclosing the details, on pain of imprisonment.’

‘And the crowd?’

‘You deal with the body. I’ll deal with the crowd.’

Octavius shrugged. ‘As you wish.’ He sounded unconcerned. He had only one day left in office – I should imagine he was glad to be rid of the problem.

Cicero went over to the door and inhaled a few deep breaths, bringing some colour back to his cheeks. Then I saw him, as I had so often, square his shoulders and clamp a confident expression on his face. He stepped outside and clambered up on to a stack of timber to address the crowd.

‘People of Rome, I have satisfied myself that the dark rumours running through the city are false!’ He had to bellow into that biting wind to make himself heard. ‘Go home to your families and enjoy the rest of the festival.’

‘But I saw the body!’ shouted a man. ‘It was a human sacrifice, to call down a curse on the republic.’

The cry was taken up by others: ‘The city is cursed!’ ‘Your consulship is cursed!’ ‘Fetch the priests!’

Cicero raised his hands. ‘Yes, the corpse was in a dreadful state. But what do you expect? The poor lad had been in the water a long time. The fish are hungry. They take their food where they can. You really want me to bring a priest? To do what? To curse the fish? To *bless* the fish?’ A few people began to laugh. ‘Since when did Romans become frightened of *fish*? Go home. Enjoy yourselves. The day after tomorrow there will be a new year, with a new consul – one who you can be sure will always guard your welfare!’

It was no great oration by his standards but it did what was required. There were even a few cheers. He jumped down. The legionaries cleared a path for us through the mob and we retreated quickly towards the city. As we neared the gate, I glanced back. At the fringes of the crowd people were already beginning to wander away in search of fresh diversions. I turned to Cicero to congratulate him on the effectiveness of his remarks, but he was leaning over the roadside ditch, vomiting.

Such was the state of the city on the eve of Cicero’s consulship – a vortex of hunger, rumour and anxiety; of crippled veterans and bankrupt farmers begging at every corner; of roistering bands of drunken young men terrorising shopkeepers; of women from good families openly prostituting themselves outside the taverns; of sudden conflagrations, violent tempests, moonless nights and scavenging dogs; of fanatics, soothsayers, beggars, fights. Pompey was still away commanding the legions in the East, and in his absence an uneasy, shifting mood swirled around the streets like river fog, giving everyone the jitters. There was a sense that some huge event was impending, but no clear idea what it might be. The new tribunes were said to be working with Caesar and

Crassus on a vast and secret scheme for giving away public land to the urban poor. Cicero had tried to find out more about it but had been rebuffed. The patricians were certain to resist it, whatever it was. Goods were scarce, food hoarded, shops empty. Even the moneylenders had stopped making loans.

As for Cicero's colleague as consul, Antonius Hybrida – Antonius the Half-Breed: Half-Man, Half-Beast – he was both wild and stupid, as befitted a candidate who had run for office on a joint ticket with Cicero's sworn enemy, Catilina. Nevertheless, knowing the perils they would face, and feeling the need for allies, Cicero had made strenuous efforts to get on good terms with him. Unfortunately his approaches had come to nothing, and I shall say why. It was the custom for the two consuls-elect to draw lots in October to decide which province each would govern after his year in office. Hybrida, who was steeped in debt, had set his heart on the rebellious but lucrative lands of Macedonia, where a vast fortune was waiting to be made. However to his dismay he drew instead the peaceful pastures of Nearer Gaul, where not even a field mouse was stirring. It was Cicero who drew Macedonia, and when the result was announced in the senate, Hybrida's face had assumed such a picture of childish resentment and surprise that the entire chamber had been convulsed by laughter. He and Cicero had not spoken since.

Little wonder then that Cicero was finding it so hard to compose his inaugural address, and that when we returned to his house from the river and he tried to resume his dictation his voice kept on trailing off. He would stare into the distance with a look of abstraction on his face and repeatedly wonder aloud why the boy had been killed in such a manner, and of what significance it was that he belonged to Hybrida. He agreed with Octavius: the likeliest culprits were the Gauls. Human sacrifice

was certainly one of their cults. He sent a message to a friend of his, Q. Fabius Sanga, who was the Gauls' principal patron in the senate, asking in confidence if he thought such an outrage was possible. But Sanga sent rather a huffy letter back within the hour saying of course not, and that the Gauls would be gravely offended if the consul-elect persisted in such damaging speculation. Cicero sighed, threw the letter aside, and attempted to pick up the threads of his thoughts. But he could not weave them together into anything coherent, and shortly before sunset he called again for his cloak and boots.

I had assumed his intention was to take a turn in the public gardens not far from the house, where he often went when he was composing a speech. But as we reached the brow of the hill, instead of turning right he pressed on towards the Esquiline Gate, and I realised to my amazement that he intended to go outside the sacred boundary to the place where the corpses were burned – a spot he usually avoided at all costs. We passed the porters with their handcarts waiting for work just beyond the gate, and the squat official residence of the carnifex, who, as public executioner, was forbidden to live within the precincts of the city. Finally we entered the sacred grove of Libitina, filled with cawing crows, and approached the temple. In those days this was the headquarters of the undertakers' guild: the place where one could buy all that was needed for a funeral, from the utensils with which to anoint a body to the bed on which the corpse was cremated. Cicero asked me for some money and went ahead and spoke to a priest. He handed him the purse, and a couple of official mourners appeared. Cicero beckoned me over. 'We are just in time,' he said.

What a curious party we must have made as we crossed the Esquiline Field in single file, the mourners first, carrying jars

of incense, then the consul-elect, then me. All around us in the dusk were the dancing flames of funeral pyres, the cries of the bereaved, and the sickly smell of incense – strong, yet not quite strong enough to disguise the stink of burning death. The mourners led us to the public *ustrina*, where a pile of corpses on a handcart were waiting to be thrown on to the flames. Devoid of clothes and shoes, these unclaimed bodies were as destitute in death as they had been in life. Only the murdered boy's was covered: I recognised it by the sailcloth shroud into which it had now been tightly sewn. As a couple of attendants tossed it easily on to the metal grille, Cicero bowed his head and the hired mourners set up a particularly noisy lamentation, no doubt in the hope of a good tip. The flames roared and flattened in the wind, and very quickly that was it: he had gone to whatever fate awaits us all.

It was a scene I have never forgotten.

Surely the greatest mercy granted us by Providence is our ignorance of the future. Imagine if we knew the outcome of our hopes and plans, or could see the manner in which we are doomed to die – how ruined our lives would be! Instead we live on dumbly from day to day as happily as animals. But all things must come to dust eventually. No human being, no system, no age is impervious to this law; everything beneath the stars will perish; the hardest rock will be worn away. Nothing endures but words.

And with this in mind, and in the renewed hope that I may live long enough to see the task through, I shall now relate the extraordinary story of Cicero's year in office as consul of the Roman republic, and what befell him in the four years afterwards – a span of time we mortals call a *lustrum*, but which to the gods is no more than the blinking of an eye.