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SPQR

A History of Ancient Rome

Written by Mary Beard

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S·P·Q·R

A HISTORY OF ANCIENT ROME

MARY BEARD

PROFILE BOOKS

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CONTENTS

Maps
7

Prologue: The History of Rome
15

1 · Cicero's Finest Hour
21

2 · In the Beginning
53

3 · The Kings of Rome
91

4 · Rome's Great Leap Forward
131

5 · A Wider World
169

6 · New Politics
209

7 · From Empire to Emperors
253

8 · The Home Front
297

9 · The Transformations of Augustus
337

10 · Fourteen Emperors
387

11 · The Haves and Have-Nots
435

12 · Rome Outside Rome
475

Epilogue: The First Roman Millennium
527

FURTHER READING 537
TIMELINE 563
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 573
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS 575
INDEX 585

PROLOGUE

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THE HISTORY OF ROME

Ancient Rome is important. To ignore the Romans is not just to turn a blind eye to the distant past. Rome still helps to define the way we understand our world and think about ourselves, from high theory to low comedy. After 2,000 years, it continues to underpin Western culture and politics, what we write and how we see the world, and our place in it.

The assassination of Julius Caesar on what the Romans called the Ides of March 44 BCE has provided the template, and the sometimes awkward justification, for the killing of tyrants ever since. The layout of the Roman imperial territory underlies the political geography of modern Europe and beyond. The main reason that London is the capital of the United Kingdom is that the Romans made it the capital of their province Britannia – a dangerous place lying, as they saw it, beyond the great Ocean that encircled the civilised world. Rome has bequeathed to us ideas of liberty and citizenship as much as of imperial exploitation, combined with a vocabulary of modern politics, from 'senators' to 'dictators'. It has loaned us its catchphrases, from 'fearing Greeks bearing gifts' to 'bread and circuses' and 'fiddling while Rome burns' – even 'where there's life there's hope'. And it has prompted laughter, awe and horror in more or less equal measure. Gladiators are as big box office now as they ever were. Virgil's great epic poem on the foundation of Rome, the *Aeneid*, almost certainly found more readers in the twentieth century CE than it did in the first century CE.

Yet the history of ancient Rome has changed dramatically over

the past fifty years, and even more so over the almost 250 years since Edward Gibbon wrote *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, his idiosyncratic historical experiment that began the modern study of Roman history in the English-speaking world. That is partly because of the new ways of looking at the old evidence, and the different questions we choose to put to it. It is a dangerous myth that we are better historians than our predecessors. We are not. But we come to Roman history with different priorities – from gender identity to food supply – that make the ancient past speak to us in a new idiom.

There has also been an extraordinary array of new discoveries – in the ground, underwater, even lost in libraries – presenting novelties from antiquity that tell us more about ancient Rome than any modern historian could ever have known before. We now have a manuscript of a touching essay by a Roman doctor whose prize possessions had just gone up in flames, which resurfaced in a Greek monastery only in 2005. We have wrecks of Mediterranean cargo ships that never made it to Rome, with their foreign sculpture, furniture and glass destined for the houses of the rich, and the wine and olive oil that were the staples of everyone. As I write, archaeological scientists are carefully examining samples drilled from the ice cap of Greenland to find the traces, even there, of the pollution produced by Roman industry. Others are putting under the microscope the human excrement found in a cesspit in Herculaneum, in southern Italy, to itemise the diet of ordinary Romans as it went into – and out of – their digestive tracts. A lot of eggs and sea urchins are part of the answer.

Roman history is always being rewritten, and always has been; in some ways we know more about ancient Rome than the Romans themselves did. Roman history, in other words, is a work in progress. This book is my contribution to that bigger project; it offers my version of why it matters. *SPQR* takes its title from another famous Roman catchphrase, *Senatus PopulusQue Romanus*, 'The Senate and People of Rome'. It is driven by a personal curiosity about Roman history, by a

conviction that a dialogue with ancient Rome is still well worth having and by the question of how a tiny and very unremarkable little village in central Italy became so dominant a power over so much territory in three continents.

This is a book about how Rome grew and sustained its position for so long, not about how it declined and fell, if indeed it ever did in the sense that Gibbon imagined. There are many ways that histories of Rome might construct a fitting conclusion; some have chosen the conversion of the emperor Constantine to Christianity on his deathbed in 337 CE or the sack of the city in 410 CE by Alaric and his Visigoths. Mine ends with a culminating moment in 212 CE, when the emperor Caracalla took the step of making every single free inhabitant of the Roman Empire a full Roman citizen, eroding the difference between conqueror and conquered and completing a process of expanding the rights and privileges of Roman citizenship that had started almost a thousand years earlier.

SPQR is not, however, a simple work of admiration. There is much in the classical world – both Roman and Greek – to engage our interest and demand our attention. Our world would be immeasurably the poorer if we did not continue to interact with theirs. But admiration is a different thing. Happily a child of my times, I bridle when I hear people talking of 'great' Roman conquerors, or even of Rome's 'great' empire. I have tried to learn to see things from the other side too.

In fact, *SPQR* confronts some of the myths and half-truths about Rome with which I, like many, grew up. The Romans did not start out with a grand plan of world conquest. Although eventually they did parade their empire in terms of some manifest destiny, the motivations that originally lay behind their military expansion through the Mediterranean world and beyond are still one of history's great puzzles. In acquiring their empire, the Romans did not brutally trample over innocent peoples who were minding their own business in peaceable harmony until the legions appeared on the horizon. Roman

victory was undoubtedly vicious. Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul has not unfairly been compared to genocide and was criticised by Romans at the time in those terms. But Rome expanded into a world not of communities living at peace with one another but of endemic violence, rival power bases backed up by military force (there was not really any alternative backing), and mini-empires. Most of Rome's enemies were as militaristic as the Romans; but, for reasons I shall try to explain, they did not win.

Rome was not simply the thuggish younger sibling of classical Greece, committed to engineering, military efficiency and absolutism, whereas the Greeks preferred intellectual inquiry, theatre and democracy. It suited some Romans to pretend that was the case, and it has suited many modern historians to present the classical world in terms of a simple dichotomy between two very different cultures. That is, as we shall see, misleading, on both sides. The Greek city-states were as keen on winning battles as the Romans were, and most had little to do with the brief Athenian democratic experiment. Far from being unthinking advocates of imperial might, several Roman writers were the most powerful critics of imperialism there have ever been. 'They create desolation and call it peace' is a slogan that has often summed up the consequences of military conquest. It was written in the second century CE by the Roman historian Tacitus, referring to Roman power in Britain.

The history of Rome is a big challenge. There is no single story of Rome, especially when the Roman world had expanded far outside Italy. The history of Rome is not the same as the history of Roman Britain or of Roman Africa. Most of my focus will be on the city of Rome and on Roman Italy, but I shall take care also to look in at Rome from the outside, from the point of view of those living in the wider territories of the empire, as soldiers, rebels or ambitious collaborators. And very different kinds of history have to be written for different periods. For the earliest history of Rome and when it was expanding

in the fourth century BCE from small village to major player in the Italian peninsula, there are no accounts written by contemporary Romans at all. The story has to be a bold work of reconstruction, which must squeeze individual pieces of evidence – a single fragment of pottery, or a few letters inscribed on stone – as hard as it can. Only three centuries later the problem is quite the reverse: how to make sense of the masses of competing contemporary evidence that may threaten to swamp any clear narrative.

Roman history also demands a particular sort of imagination. In some ways, to explore ancient Rome from the twenty-first century is rather like walking on a tightrope, a very careful balancing act. If you look down on one side, everything seems reassuringly familiar: there are conversations going on that we almost join, about the nature of freedom or problems of sex; there are buildings and monuments we recognise and family life lived out in ways we understand, with all their troublesome adolescents; and there are jokes that we 'get'. On the other side, it seems completely alien territory. That means not just the slavery, the filth (there was hardly any such thing as refuse collection in ancient Rome), the human slaughter in the arena and the death from illnesses whose cure we now take for granted; but also the newborn babies thrown away on rubbish heaps, the child brides and the flamboyant eunuch priests.

This is a world we will begin to explore through one particular moment of Roman history, which the Romans never ceased to puzzle over and which modern writers, from historians to dramatists, have never ceased to debate. It offers the best introduction to some of the key characters of ancient Rome, to the richness of Romans' discussion of their own past and to the ways in which we continue to recapture and try to make sense of it – and to why the history of Rome, its Senate and its People still matter.

CHAPTER ONE

•

CICERO'S FINEST HOUR

SPQR: 63 BCE

Our history of ancient Rome begins in the middle of the first century BCE, more than 600 years after the city was founded. It begins with promises of revolution, with a terrorist conspiracy to destroy the city, with undercover operations and public harangues, with a battle fought between Romans and Romans, and with citizens (innocent or not) rounded up and summarily executed in the interests of homeland security. The year is 63 BCE. On the one side is Lucius Sergius Catilina ('Catiline' in English), a disgruntled, bankrupt aristocrat and the architect of a plot, so it was believed, to assassinate Rome's elected officials and burn the place down – writing off all debts, of rich and poor alike, in the process. On the other side is Marcus Tullius Cicero (just 'Cicero' from now on), the famous orator, philosopher, priest, poet, politician, wit and raconteur, one of those marked out for assassination – and a man who never ceased to use his rhetorical talents to boast how he had uncovered Catiline's terrible plot and saved the state. This was his finest hour.

In 63 BCE the city of Rome was a vast metropolis of more than a million inhabitants, larger than any other in Europe before the nineteenth century; and, although as yet it had no emperors, it ruled over an empire stretching from Spain to Syria, from the South of France to

the Sahara. It was a sprawling mixture of luxury and filth, liberty and exploitation, civic pride and murderous civil war. In the chapters that follow we shall look much further back, to the very start of Roman time and to the early exploits, belligerent and otherwise, of the Roman people. We shall think about what lies behind some of those stories of early Rome that still strike a chord today, from 'Romulus and Remus' to 'The Rape of Lucretia'. And we shall be asking questions that historians have asked since antiquity itself. How, and why, did an ordinary little town in central Italy grow so much bigger than any other city in the ancient Mediterranean and come to control such a huge empire? What, if anything, was special about the Romans? But with the history of Rome it makes little sense to begin the story at the very beginning.

It is only in the first century BCE that we can start to explore Rome, close up and in vivid detail, through contemporary eyes. An extraordinary wealth of words survives from this period: from private letters to public speeches, from philosophy to poetry – epic and erotic, scholarly and straight from the street. Thanks to all this, we can still follow the day-to-day wheeling and dealing of Rome's political grandees. We can eavesdrop on their bargaining and their trade-offs and glimpse their back-stabbing, metaphorical and literal. We can even get a taste of their private lives: their marital tiffs, their cash-flow problems, their grief at the death of beloved children, or occasionally of their beloved slaves. There is no earlier period in the history of the West that it is possible to get to know quite so well or so intimately (we have nothing like such rich and varied evidence from classical Athens). It is not for more than a millennium, in the world of Renaissance Florence, that we find any other place that we can know in such detail again.

What is more, it was during the first century BCE that Roman writers themselves began systematically to study the earlier centuries of their city and their empire. Curiosity about Rome's past certainly goes back further than that: we can still read, for example, an analysis of the city's rise to power written by a Greek resident in the mid second

century BCE. But it is only from the first century BCE that Roman scholars and critics began to pose many of the historical questions that we still pose even now. By a process that combined learned research with a good deal of constructive invention, they pieced together a version of early Rome that we still rely on today. We still see Roman history, at least in part, through first-century BCE eyes. Or, to put it another way, Roman *history*, as we know it, started here.

Sixty-three BCE is a significant year in that crucial century. It was a time of near disaster for the city. Over the 1,000 years that we will be exploring in this book, Rome faced danger and defeat many times. Around 390 BCE, for example, a posse of marauding Gauls occupied the city. In 218 BCE the Carthaginian warlord, Hannibal, famously crossed the Alps with his thirty-seven elephants and inflicted terrible losses on the Romans before they eventually managed to fight him off. Roman estimates of casualties at the Battle of Cannae in 216 BCE, up to 70,000 deaths in a single afternoon, make it as great a bloodbath as Gettysburg or the first day of the Somme, maybe even greater. And, almost equally fearsome in the Roman imagination, in the 70s BCE a scratch force of ex-gladiators and runaways, under the command of Spartacus, proved more than a match for some ill-trained legions. The Romans were never as invincible in battle as we tend to assume, or as they liked to make out. In 63 BCE, however, they faced the enemy within, a terrorist plot at the heart of the Roman establishment.

The story of this crisis can still be traced in intimate detail, day by day, occasionally hour by hour. We know precisely where much of it happened, and in a few places we can still look up to some of exactly the same monuments as dominated the scene in 63 BCE. We can follow the sting operations that gave Cicero his information on the plot and see how Catiline was forced out of the city to his makeshift army north of Rome and into a battle with the official Roman legions that cost him his life. We can also glimpse some of the arguments, controversies and wider questions that the crisis raised and still does. The tough



1. The heavy arches and columns of the '*Tabularium*', built into Michelangelo's Palazzo above, is still a major landmark at one end of the Roman Forum. Constructed just a couple of decades before Cicero was consul in 63 BCE, it must then have seemed one of the most splendid recent architectural developments. Its function is less clear. It was obviously a public building of some kind, but not necessarily the 'Record Office' (*tabularium*) that is often assumed.

response by Cicero – including those summary executions – presented in stark form issues that trouble us even today. Is it legitimate to eliminate 'terrorists' outside the due processes of law? How far should civil rights be sacrificed in the interests of homeland security? The Romans never ceased to debate 'The Conspiracy of Catiline', as it came to be known. Was Catiline wholly evil, or was there something to be said in mitigation of what he did? At what price was revolution averted? The events of 63 BCE, and the catchphrases created then, have continued to resonate throughout Western history. Some of the exact words spoken in the tense debates that followed the discovery

of the plot still find their place in our own political rhetoric and are still, as we shall see, paraded on the placards and banners, and even in the tweets, of modern political protest.

Whatever its rights and wrongs, 'The Conspiracy' takes us to the centre of Roman political life in the first century BCE, to its conventions, controversies and conflicts. In doing so, it allows us to glimpse in action the 'Senate' and the 'Roman People' – the two institutions whose names are embedded in my title, *SPQR* (*Senatus PopulusQue Romanus*). Individually, and sometimes in bitter opposition, these were the main sources of political authority in first-century BCE Rome. Together they formed a shorthand slogan for the legitimate power of the Roman state, a slogan that lasted throughout Roman history



2. SPQR is still plastered over the city of Rome, on everything from manhole covers to rubbish bins. It can be traced back to the lifetime of Cicero, making it one of the most enduring acronyms in history. It has predictably prompted parody. '*Sono Pazzi Questi Romani*' is an Italian favourite: 'These Romans are mad'.

and continues to be used in Italy in the twenty-first century CE. More widely still, the senate (minus the *PopulusQue Romanus*) has lent its name to modern legislative assemblies the world over, from the USA to Rwanda.

The cast of characters in the crisis includes some of the most famous figures in Roman history. Gaius Julius Caesar, then in his thirties, made a radical contribution to the debate on how to punish the conspirators. Marcus Licinius Crassus, the Roman plutocrat who notoriously remarked that you could count no one rich if he did not have the cash to raise his own private army, played some mysterious part behind the scenes. But centre stage, as Catiline's main adversary, we find the one person whom it is possible to get to know better than anyone else in the whole of the ancient world. Cicero's speeches, essays, letters, jokes and poetry still fill dozens of volumes of modern printed text. There is no one else in antiquity until Augustine – Christian saint, prolific theologian and avid self-scrutiniser – 450 years later, whose life is documented in public and private fully enough to be able to reconstruct a plausible biography in modern terms. And it is largely through Cicero's writing, his eyes and his prejudices that we see the Roman world of the first century BCE and much of the city's history up to his day. The year 63 BCE was the turning point of his career: for things were never quite so good for Cicero again. His career ended twenty years later, in failure. Still confident of his own importance, occasionally a name to conjure with but no longer in the front rank, he was murdered in the civil wars that followed the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE, his head and right hand pinned up in the centre of Rome for all to see – and to mangle and maim.

Cicero's grisly death presaged a yet bigger revolution in the first century BCE, which began with a form of popular political power, even if not a 'democracy' exactly, and ended with an autocrat established on the throne and the Roman Empire under one-man rule. Though Cicero may have 'saved the state' in 63 BCE, the truth is that the state

in the form he knew was not to last much longer. There was another revolution on the horizon, which would be more successful than Catiline's. To the 'Senate and Roman People' was soon added the overweening figure of the 'emperor', embodied in a series of autocrats who were part of Western history, flattered and abused, obeyed and ignored, for centuries. But that is a story for later in *SPQR*. For now we shall put down our feet in one of the most memorable, meatiest and most revealing moments in the whole of Roman history.

Cicero versus Catiline

The conflict between Cicero and Catiline was partly a clash of political ideology and ambition, but it was also a clash between men of very different backgrounds. Both of them stood at, or very near, the top of Roman politics; but that is where the similarity ends. In fact, their contrasting careers offer a vivid illustration of just how varied political life in Rome of the first century BCE could be.

Catiline, the would-be revolutionary, had the more conventional, more privileged and apparently safer start in life, as in politics. He came from a distinguished old family that traced its lineage back centuries to the mythical founding fathers of Rome. His ancestor Sergestus was said to have fled from the East to Italy with Aeneas after the Trojan War, before the city of Rome even existed. Among his blue-blooded forebears, his great-grandfather was a hero of the war against Hannibal, with the extra claim to fame of being the first man known to have entered combat with a prosthetic hand – probably just a metal hook that replaced his right hand, lost in an earlier battle. Catiline himself had a successful early career and was elected to a series of junior political offices, but in 63 BCE he was close to bankruptcy. A string of crimes was attached to his name, from the murder of his first wife and his own son to sex with a virgin priestess. But whatever his

expensive vices, his financial problems came partly from his repeated attempts to secure election as one of the two consuls, the most powerful political posts in the city.

Electioneering at Rome could be a costly business. By the first century BCE it required the kind of lavish generosity that is not always easy to distinguish from bribery. The stakes were high. The men who were successful in the elections had the chance to recoup their outlay, legally or illegally, with some of the perks of office. The failures – and, like military defeats, there were many more of those in Rome than is usually acknowledged – fell ever more deeply into debt.

That was Catiline's position after he had been beaten in the annual elections for the consulship in both 64 and 63 BCE. Although the usual story is that he had been leaning in that direction before, he now had little option but to resort to 'revolution' or 'direct action' or 'terrorism', whichever you choose to call it. Joining forces with other upper-class desperadoes in similar straits, he appealed to the support of the discontented poor within the city while mustering his makeshift army outside it. And there was no end to his rash promises of debt relief (one of the most despicable forms of radicalism in the eyes of the Roman landed classes) or to his bold threats to take out the leading politicians and to put the whole city to flames.

Or so Cicero, who was one of those who believed he had been earmarked for destruction, summed up his adversary's motives and aims. He was of a very different stock from Catiline. He came from a wealthy, landed background, as all high-level Roman politicians did. But his origins lay outside the capital, in the small town of Arpinum, about 70 miles from Rome, or at least a day's journey at the ancient speed of travel. Though they must have been major players locally, no one in his family before him had ever been prominent on the Roman political scene. With none of Catiline's advantages, Cicero relied on his native talents, on the high-level connections he assiduously cultivated – and on speaking his way to the top. That is to say, his main

claim to fame was as a star advocate in the Roman courts; and the celebrity status and prominent supporters that this gave him meant that he was easily elected to each of the required series of junior offices in turn, just like Catiline. But in 64 BCE, where Catiline failed, Cicero succeeded in winning the race for the next year's consulship.

That crowning success had not been an entirely foregone conclusion. For all his celebrity, Cicero faced the disadvantage of being a 'new man', as the Romans called those without political ancestry, and at one stage he even seems to have considered making an electoral pact with Catiline, seedy reputation or not. But in the end, the influential voters swayed it. The Roman electoral system openly and unashamedly gave extra weight to the votes of the rich; and many of them must have concluded that Cicero was a better option than Catiline, whatever their snobbish disdain for his 'newness'. Some of his rivals called him just a 'lodger' at Rome, a 'part-time citizen', but he topped the poll. Catiline ended up in the unsuccessful third place. In second place, elected as the other consul, was Gaius Antonius Hybrida, uncle of a more famous Antonius ('Mark Antony'), whose reputation turned out to be not much better than Catiline's.

By the summer of 63 BCE, Cicero appears to have got wind of definite danger from Catiline, who was trying his luck as a candidate again. Using his authority as consul, Cicero postponed the next round of elections, and when he finally did let them go ahead, he turned up at the poll with an armed guard and wearing a military breastplate clearly visible under his toga. It was a histrionic display, and the combination of civilian and military kit was alarmingly incongruous, rather as if a modern politician were to enter the legislature in a business suit with a machine gun slung over his shoulder. But it worked. These scare tactics, combined with Catiline's vociferously populist programme, made sure that he was once more defeated. Claiming that he was a down-and-out standing up for other down-and-outs could hardly have endeared him to elite voters.

Soon after the elections, sometime in the early autumn, Cicero began to receive much clearer intelligence of a violent plot. For a long time he had been getting trickles of information through the girlfriend of one of Catiline's 'accomplices', a woman named Fulvia, who had more or less turned double agent. Now, thanks to a further piece of treachery from the other side, and via the wealthy Marcus Crassus as intermediary, he had a bundle of letters in his hands that directly incriminated Catiline and referred to the terrible bloodshed that was planned – information soon supplemented by definite reports of armed forces gathering north of the city in support of the insurrection. Finally, after he dodged an assassination attempt planned for 7 November, thanks to a tip-off from Fulvia, Cicero summoned the senate to meet the next day so that he could formally denounce Catiline and frighten him out of Rome.

The senators had already, in October, issued a decree urging (or allowing) Cicero as consul 'to make sure that the state should come to no harm', roughly the ancient equivalent of a modern 'emergency powers' or 'prevention of terrorism' act, and no less controversial. Now, on 8 November, they listened while Cicero went through the whole case against Catiline, in a blistering and well-informed attack. It was a marvellous mixture of fury, indignation, self-criticism and apparently solid fact. One minute he was reminding the assembled company of Catiline's notorious past; the next he was disingenuously regretting that he himself had not reacted to the danger speedily enough; the next he was pouring out precise details of the plot – in whose house the conspirators had gathered, on what dates, who was involved and what exactly their plans were. Catiline had turned up to face the denunciation in person. He asked the senators not to believe everything they were told and made some jibes about Cicero's modest background, compared with his own distinguished ancestors and their splendid achievements. But he must have realised that his position was hopeless. Overnight he left town.