

## ‘SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome’, by Mary Beard

A history of the hardscrabble village that became the centre of a vast empire is always alive to the contemporary relevance of its subject



Mosaic of gladiators fighting

Review by Shadi Bartsch OCTOBER 23 2015



Toting Mary Beard’s *SPQR* through the X-ray line at O’Hare airport, I was pulled aside by a security guard who seemed convinced that it was a hollowed-out way of transporting weaponry on to a flight. Granted, at 600 pages this is an imposing book. But it is a work whose scope justifies its size: in *SPQR* (Roman shorthand for “the Senate and the People of Rome”) the Cambridge classics professor covers nearly 1,000 years of history, taking us from the founding of the city and the overthrow of the early kings to the transition from republic to empire and up to 212AD.

In the process, we are asked to reflect on some interesting questions. Why did the Romans ascribe the foundation of their city to a primeval act of fratricide (Romulus's murder of Remus for making fun of his nascent city walls)? How did Rome's early status as an asylum for criminals and exiles shape its policies on citizenship for non-Romans (the resolutely sealed citizen class of ancient Athens offers a striking contrast)? When and how did the city change from a hardscrabble village to an urban metropolis and, eventually, the capital of a vast empire? And to what degree was the desirability of being a Roman in the second century AD responsible for the continued success of that empire?

Beard brings to bear her expertise in history and archaeology on such topics and many more, from politics to trade and even emperors riding ostriches, but she wears her erudition lightly. Adding to its accessibility, the book is generously illustrated throughout with photographs and plates. Many readers will find pictures of objects such as a rusting Roman gynaecological speculum, a *graffito* showing Spartacus in the arena, and lead sling bullets inscribed with messages such as "I'm going for Madam Octavius' arsehole" (from Octavian's siege of Perugia in 41-40 BC) fascinating on their own account.

The author is at her strongest when examining the claims the Romans made about their own past, especially in their historiography and political theory. Here, she illustrates clearly and repeatedly how their accounts of what happened hundreds of years ago inevitably exported the concerns and perspectives of their present into their past. The idea of a great destiny, the tradition of an exemplary deed for others to emulate, even the basic institutions of the Republican state, were all projected backwards by the Romans on to the earliest days of their city and then used to explain the present.

When we read the historian Livy describing how the farmer Camillus selflessly saved Rome from the Gauls after he was granted absolute power, we must understand that this version of the legend is meant to reflect the motives of Livy's contemporary, the emperor Augustus, who in turn claims Camillus as a model. The circularity of these processes has implications not only for how the Roman elite wrote up their history, but also, in turn, how we moderns approach our history as well, often with narratives that are more about the present than anything else.

Beard briefly hints at one such modern idealisation of the past when she reminds us that the American founding fathers themselves were not paragons of democracy. When they looked to Rome and not Athens in their effort to establish a nation with "checks and balances", it was in order to *avoid* a political system in which every citizen, no matter how rich or poor, how educated or not, had one vote (I do not even try to address the fraught topics of slavery, gender, and indigenous peoples here). One-man one-vote, opined Madison, had directly contributed to Athens' downfall by allowing personal self-interest to override wiser views. The US, then, was conceived on an elite Roman argument that connected landownership to wisdom, and in the early days of the nation, property was a prerequisite for the right to vote and to hold office. These are nagging details for a present day that believes in absolute equality — and if we were good Romans we would no doubt rewrite them to be ideologically appropriate for the present, with Jefferson freeing his slaves and distributing voting-booths around rural Virginia. Perhaps pasts are inconvenient because they remind us that the beliefs of the present are transient as well.

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Inevitably, Beard sometimes strains the relevance of her Roman examples in her effort to sneak the ancient Romans into the present. The first chapter, for example, opens with a disgruntled Roman faction of the 60s BC, led, according to Beard, by a “terrorist” executed in the interests of

“homeland security”. These terms have modern contexts (fanaticism, 9/11, legislation curtailing the right to privacy) that make them odd choices for describing the aristocrat Catiline and his band of impoverished thugs. The rape of the virtuous Lucretia by the king Tarquinius Superbus, who threatens to kill her and a slave and leave their naked bodies for her husband to find if she does not consent, is likewise hard to align with what Beard calls “versions of some of our own arguments about rape”. But it is always difficult to know how far one can push parallels and at what moment the benefits of thinking with the past simply become yet another veil obfuscating the present. Beard herself is sensitive to the issue, warning us correctly that it would be folly to apply “Roman approaches to citizenship . . . to our situation, centuries later”. Difficulties with immigration and refugees in the EU may come to mind. But most new Roman citizens, in fact, had been slaves or war-captives, not fugitives from an unbearable civil war.

On the other hand, sometimes the mirror that Rome provides us with is not only apt but actually disturbing. Beard discusses briefly the Roman *idée fixe* that their expansion in Italy and abroad took place by means of a series of “just wars” that had divine support, a belief held so strongly that not even severe military setbacks could put a dent in it. The continued vitality of this idea was facilitated by the contractual and ritual-obsessed nature of Roman religion, with the result that a disastrous defeat at sea in 249BC could be ascribed, not to the disfavour of the gods, but to the fact that the admiral had thrown the sacred chickens overboard before the battle in a fit of temper. We no longer have sacred chickens to blame, but whether something else has taken over their role on deck bears consideration. In this regard and many others, Beard’s book is a refreshing rethink of a very old topic.