

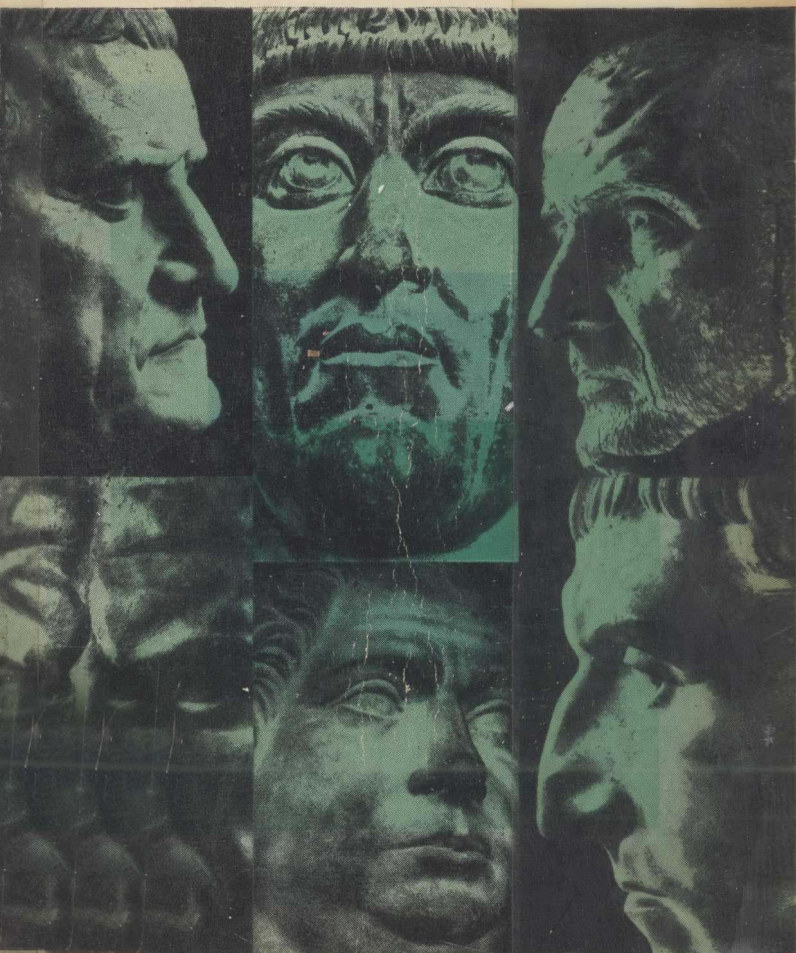


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The Romans

R. H. Barrow



PELICAN BOOKS

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THE ROMANS

THE ROMANS

R. H. BARROW

WITH SO MANY TEACHERS AND WITH SO MANY
EXAMPLES HAS ANTIQUITY FURNISHED US THAT
NO AGE CAN BE THOUGHT MORE FORTUNATE IN
THE CHANCE OF ITS BIRTH THAN OUR OWN AGE,
FOR WHOSE INSTRUCTION MEN OF EARLIER GENERATIONS
HAVE EARNESTLY LABOURED.

QUINTILIAN (A.D.35-95)



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Penguin Books Ltd, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England
Penguin Books Inc., 3300 Clipper Mill Road, Baltimore 11, Md, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia

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First published 1949
Reprinted 1951, 1953, 1955, 1958, 1960, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1967

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Made and printed in Great Britain
by Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd,
Aylesbury, Bucks
Set in Intertype Baskerville

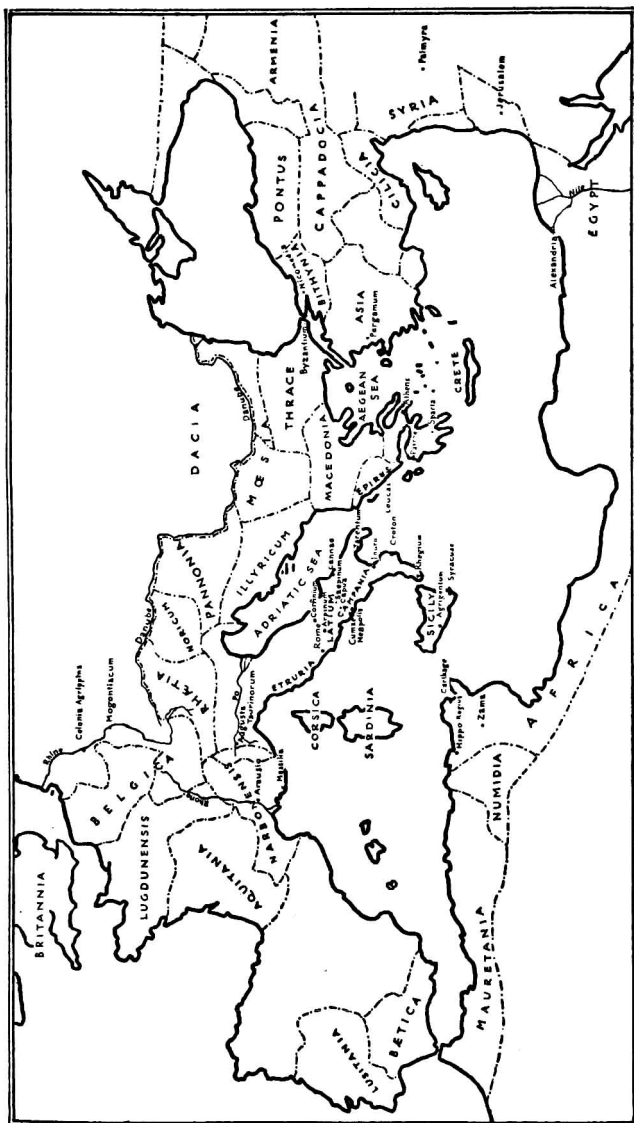
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CHAPTER I

In the days beyond our memory the traditional ways attached to themselves by their own appeal the outstanding men of the time; and to the ancient ways and to the institutions of their ancestors men of moral superiority clung fast.

CICERO

(a) WHAT MANNER OF MEN?

WHAT manner of men were the Romans? We commonly say that men are known best by their deeds; therefore to answer this question it would be wise to go, first, to Roman history for the deeds, and, secondly, to Roman literature for the mind behind the deeds. The Romans would willingly be judged by their history, for to them history meant deeds; the Latin for 'history' is simply 'things done (*res gestae*)'. Of their literature it has been well said, 'Latin literature should be studied mainly with a view to understanding Roman history, while Greek history should be studied mainly with a view to understanding Greek literature'. It seems, then, that the answer to the question can be provided only by a study of Roman history, and should therefore appear in the last chapter of this book rather than in the first. But this book is not a history of Rome; it is rather an invitation to consider whether Roman history is not worth further study, and the invitation takes the form of slight sketches of certain aspects of the Roman achievement.



Throughout their history the Romans were acutely aware that there is 'power' outside man, individually or collec-

tively, of which man must take account. He must subordinate himself to something. If he refuses, he invites disaster; if he subordinates himself unwillingly, he becomes the victim of superior force; if willingly, he finds that he may be raised to the rank of cooperator; by cooperation he can see something of the trend, even the purpose, of that superior power. Willing cooperation gives a sense of dedication; the purposes become clearer, and he feels he is an agent or an instrument in forwarding them; at a higher level he becomes conscious of a vocation, of a mission for himself and for men like him, who compose the state. When the Roman general celebrated his 'triumph' after a victorious campaign, he progressed through the city from the gates to the temple of Jupiter (later in imperial times to the temple of Mars Ultor) and there offered to the god 'the achievements of Jupiter wrought *through* the Roman people'.

From the earliest days of Rome we can detect in the Roman a sense of dedication, at first crude and inarticulate and by no means unaccompanied by fear. In later days it is clearly expressed and is often a mainspring of action. In the latest days the mission of Rome is clearly proclaimed; it is often proclaimed most loudly by men who strictly were not Romans, and most insistently at the very time when in its visible expression the mission was accomplished. The sense of dedication at first reveals itself in humble forms, in the household and in the family; it is enlarged in the city-state and it finds its culmination in the imperial idea. From time to time it employs different categories of thought and modes of expression; but in its essence it is religious, for it is a leap beyond experience. When the mission is accomplished, its basis changes.

This is the clue to Roman character and to Roman history.

The Roman mind is the mind of the farmer and soldier; not farmer, nor soldier, but farmer-soldier; and this is true on the whole even in the later ages when the Roman might be neither farmer nor soldier. 'Unremitting work' is the lot of the farmer, for the seasons wait for no man. Yet his own work by itself will achieve nothing; he may plan and prepare, till and sow; in patience he must await the aid of forces which he cannot understand, still less control. If he can make them favourable, he will; but most often he can only cooperate, and he places himself in line with them that they may use him as their instrument, and so he may achieve his end. Accidents of weather and pest may frustrate him; he must accept compromise and be patient. Routine is the order of his life; seed-time, growth, and harvest follow in appointed series. The life of the fields is his life. If as a citizen he is moved to political action at last, it will be in defence of his land or his markets or the labour of his sons. To him the knowledge born of experience is worth more than speculative theory. His virtues are honesty and thrift, forethought and patience, work and endurance and courage, self-reliance, simplicity, and humility in the face of what is greater than himself.

Such also are the virtues of the soldier. He too will know the value of routine, which is a part of discipline, for he must respond as by instinct to a sudden call. He must be self-reliant. The strength and endurance of the farmer serve the soldier; his practical skill helps him to become what the Roman soldier must be, a builder and a digger of ditches and maker of roads and ramparts. He lays out a camp or a fortification as well as he lays out a plot or a system of drains. He can live on the land, for that is what he has done all his life. He too knows the incalculable element which may upset the best of dispositions. He is

conscious of unseen forces, and he attributes 'luck' to a successful general whom some power – destiny or fortune – uses as an instrument. He gives his loyalty to persons and to places and to friends. If he becomes politically violent, he will be violent to secure, when the wars are over, land to till and a farm to live in; and still greater loyalty rewards the general who champions his cause. He has seen many men and many places, and with due caution he will imitate what he has seen to work; but for him 'that corner of the earth smiles above all others', his home and native fields, and he will not wish to see them changed.

The study of Roman history is, first, the study of the process by which Rome, always conscious of her dedication, painfully grew from being the city-state on the Seven Hills until she became mistress of the world; secondly, the study of the means by which she acquired and maintained that dominion; the means was her singular power of turning enemies into friends, and eventually into Romans, while yet they remained Spaniards or Gauls or Africans. From her they derived 'Romanitas', their 'Roman-ness'. 'Romanitas' is a convenient word used by the Christian Tertullian to mean all that a Roman takes for granted, the Roman point of view and habit of thought. It is akin to 'Roman civilization' only upon a strict view of what civilization is. Civilization is what men think and feel and do, and the values which they assign to what they think and feel and do. It is true that their creative thoughts and their standards of feeling and value may issue in acts which profoundly affect the use which they make of material things; but 'material civilization' is the least important aspect of civilization, which really resides in men's minds. As Tacitus said, it is the ignorant (and he was speaking of the Britons) who think that fine buildings and

comforts and luxuries make up civilization. The Latin word here used (*humanitas*) was a favourite word with Cicero, and the conception behind it was peculiarly Roman and was born of Roman experience. It means, on the one side, the sense of the dignity of one's own human personality, which is a thing unique and which must be cared for and developed to the full; on the other side, it means a recognition of the personalities of others and their right to care for their own personalities; and this recognition implies compromise and self-restraint and sympathy and consideration.

But the usual and more concrete phrase for civilization is simply 'the Roman peace'. It was in this idea that the world found it easiest to see the fulfilment of that mission which Roman character and experience and power had gradually brought to the upper levels of consciousness and had deliberately discharged. In the earliest days of the Roman people its leader solemnly took the 'auspices' by observation of signs revealed through religious rites, to discover whether the action which the state proposed to take was in line with the gods' will, which ruled the world. Cicero, enumerating the fundamental principles upon which the state rests, places first 'religion and the auspices', and by 'auspices' he means that unbroken succession of men from Romulus onwards to whom was given the duty to discover the gods' will. The 'auspices' and the sacred colleges, the Vestal Virgins and the rest, find their place in the letters of Symmachus, born A.D. 340, who was a tenacious leader of pagan opposition to Christianity, the 'official' religion of the Empire. Cicero it is who says that the birth of Roman power, its increase and its maintenance, are due to Roman religion; Horace says that subordination to the gods has given the Roman his empire. Four centuries later St Augustine devotes the first

part of his most powerful book to wrestling with the prevalent faith that the greatness of Rome had been due to pagan gods, and that salvation from the threatening doom was to be found in them. It may well be said, in the words of the Greek Polybius, 205–123 B.C., himself a sceptic, 'What more than anything else distinguishes the Roman state and sets it above all others is its attitude to the gods. It seems to me that what is a reproach to other communities actually holds together the Roman state – I mean its awe of the gods', and he uses the same word which St Paul used on Mars' Hill in Athens. Polybius was not to know that at the very end, when the Roman Empire was overrun by barbarians, it would be the idea of the greatness and eternity of Rome which would hold together belief in the gods.

(b) 'THE OLD WAYS'

Roman religion was the religion, first of the family, then of the extension of the family, the state. The family was consecrate, so, therefore, was the state. The simple ideas and rites held and practised by families were adjusted and enlarged, partly by new conceptions created by new needs, partly by contact with other races and cultures, when families came together to form settlements and so eventually to fashion the city of Rome.

Anthropologists have given the name 'animism' to the stage of primitive religion which supposes a 'power' or 'spirit' or 'will' to reside in everything. To the primitive Roman, *numen*, power, or will, resided everywhere, or rather it manifested itself everywhere by action. All that can be known about it is that it acts, but the manner of its acting is undetermined. Man is an intruder into the realm of spirit, whose characteristic is action. How can he miti-

gate the awe which he feels, and how can he secure that the *numen* shall produce the requisite action, and so win for himself the ‘peace of the gods’?

The first need is to ‘fix’ this vague power in a way acceptable to it, and so to narrow or to focus its action into this or that purpose vital to man. It was thought that to *name* its manifestation in individual phenomena gave definition to what was vague, and, so to speak, piped the energy into the desired end. And so, as the actions of the farmer and his family, engaged in agriculture and weaving and cooking and bringing up children, were many, so the activity of this power was split up into innumerable *named* powers energizing the actions of the household. Every minute operation of nature and man – the manifold life of the fields, the daily tasks of the farmer, the daily round of his wife, the growth and care of their children – took place in the presence and by the energy of these vague powers, now becoming formless deities.

With ‘naming’, i.e. invocation, went prayers and offerings of food and meal, milk and wine, and, on occasion, animal sacrifice. The appropriate words and rites were known to the head of the family, who was the priest. Words and ritual were passed on from father to son till they were fixed immutably. A flaw in invocation or ceremony would prevent the *numen* from issuing into the action which the family or individual was undertaking, and so failure would result. The names of many of these household gods have passed into the languages of Europe: Vesta, the spirit of the hearth-fire; the Penates, the preservers of the store-cupboard; the Lares, the guardians of the house. But there were very many others. Daily prayer was said; the family meal was a religious ceremony, and incense and libations were offered. Certain festivals related to the dead, who were sometimes regarded as hostile

and therefore to be expelled from the house by rite, sometimes as kindly spirits to be associated closely with all family festivals and anniversaries.

When the families coalesced to form a community, family cult and ritual formed the basis of state cult. At first the king was the priest; when kings ceased to exist, the title survived as 'king of the sacred things'. To help the 'king' were 'colleges' of priests, that is to say, ordinary men, not a special caste, who were colleagues together in ordering worship and festivals. The chief college was that of the *pontifices*, which took charge of the accumulated lore, made rules, and kept records of feasts and of outstanding events of religious significance to the state. They built up a sacred law (*ius divinum*). Minor colleges assisted them; thus, the Vestal Virgins tended the hearth-fire of the state, the augurs took the omens from the flight of birds or from the entrails of a sacrificed animal; for the gods were supposed to impress on the sensitive organs of a consecrated animal signs of approval or of disapproval. The agricultural festivals of the farmstead were given national importance; the harvest, the safety of the boundaries, the hunting of wolves from the fields became the concern of the city. New festivals were added, and the list was kept in a Calendar, of which we have records. In his origin Mars was a god of the fields; the farmer-soldiers, organized for war, turned him into a god of battle. New gods came to the notice of the Romans as their horizon widened; and deities of the Etruscan and Greek cities in Italy found their way into the Calendar. Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva came from Etruria; the Greek Hephaistos was equated with Volcanus, whom the Romans took over from their Etruscan neighbours. There were many 'Italic' deities too, for, though we have spoken for simplicity's sake of Romans, Rome was itself made up of a fusion of