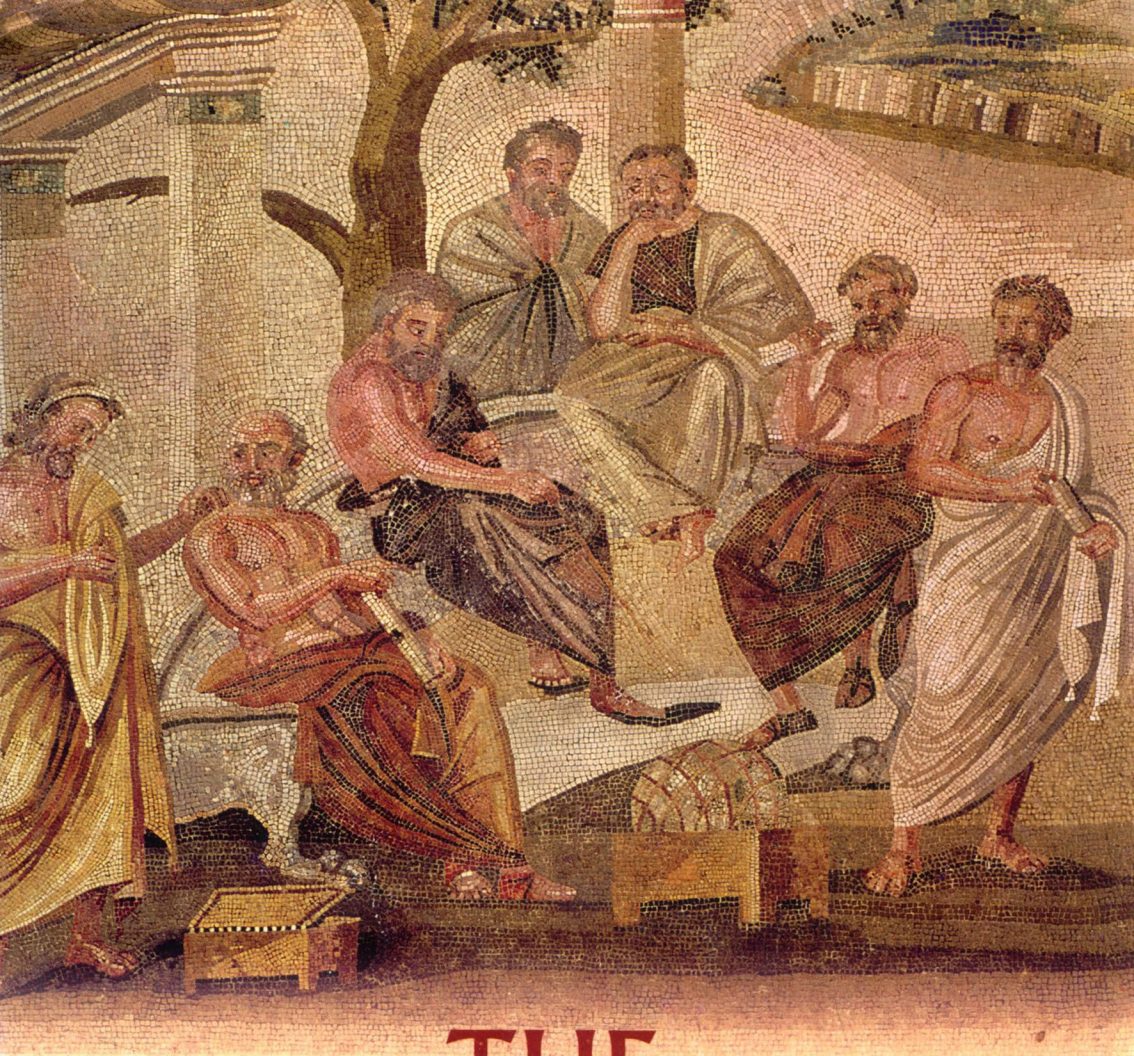

THE ROMANS AND THEIR WORLD

A SHORT INTRODUCTION

BRIAN CAMPBELL

The Romans and Their World

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The Romans and Their World

For Karen

Illustrations

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Preface

WHEN FIRST APPROACHED BY YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, I THOUGHT THAT IT would be a useful experience to write a book about ancient Rome without the tyranny of footnotes, and indeed be rather enjoyable, but it turned out to be much more challenging than I had imagined. The sheer amount of material and the number of scholarly contending views make it difficult to provide an account that is simultaneously readable, reasonably complete though concise, lively, but not so simplified as to mislead on the complexity of the subject matter. However, I have attempted to provide a straightforward guide to the world of the Romans for an interested general audience and students, using a chronological narrative that also embraces thematic treatment. I have frequently quoted directly from ancient writers in order to give a flavour of their interpretation of their world. The book begins with the earliest settlements at Rome and ends with the removal of Romulus Augustulus, the last 'Roman' emperor in the west, in AD 476.

In completing the text I am once again greatly in the debt of Professor David Buck and Dr John Curran, who read the whole typescript in a sympathetic and constructively critical way. Through many years I have been sustained by the erudition, humour and friendship of these two scholars. They are of course not responsible for the errors and misjudgements that remain. I especially thank Heather McCallum of Yale University Press, London for her patience, confidence, and support for a rather wayward author, and Richard Mason, my copy-editor, for his thorough work.

Finally, the love and calm common sense of my wife have over many years helped me to survive modern academic life.

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CHAPTER ONE

Becoming Master of Italy

The Setting

With hindsight and patriotic fervour the historian Livy reflected on the advantages of the site of Rome with its hills and the river Tiber:

> With good reason did gods and men choose this site for founding a city; the hills promote health, the river (Tiber) is advantageous since along it are brought foodstuffs from inland areas and along it seaborne produce is received (in the city); it is convenient to the advantage of the sea but is not exposed to the dangers of enemy fleets by being too close; it is in the centre of the districts of Italy and is a site uniquely suitable for the development of the city. (5.54)

Livy ignores the serious flooding that the Tiber frequently inflicted on the low-lying areas of the city, but emphasizes the river as a route of communications and transport, that is, both down the Tiber valley from the north, and south of the city providing a way for the import of goods. Furthermore, a road (*via Salaria*) along the left bank of the Tiber carried the salt trade from the river mouth along the valley. The Tiber Island was the last major ford on the river and the adjacent readily defensible hills allowed the local population to control it.

On the site of the future city of Rome traces of permanent occupation in the area of the *forum Boarium* (cattle market) date from *c.*1000 BC, and the settlers lived by subsistence agriculture on cereals and legumes and by stock-raising. Around 830–770 small village communities started to come together; in this period reed and clay huts on the Palatine hill constituted the main form of dwelling. Around the early sixth century these huts were replaced with more elaborate, permanent structures, and archaeological evidence suggests that there

was a wall around the early settlement on the Palatine. It is quite possible that various hills in the locality may have been occupied by different groups.

When Romans came later to discuss the foundation of their city (traditionally 754 or 753 BC), they naturally developed stories that established Roman identity and character as they hoped that other peoples would see them. Romantic stories of foundation by Romulus, who then became the first king, are probably fiction. According to one account, Amulius, king of Alba Longa, having deposed his elder brother Numitor, ordered the twin babies of Numitor's daughter Rhea Silvia to be drowned in the Tiber. But the river was in flood and as the waters subsided the basket containing the twins finally drifted ashore where a she-wolf found and suckled them, until they were discovered by the royal shepherd Faustulus who took them back to his wife. She named them Romulus and Remus, and Remus was eventually murdered by Romulus because he mockingly jumped over the wall as his brother started to build fortifications. Despite the traditional elements in the story, which by the way recognized the troublesome nature of the Tiber, it was almost certainly an indigenous legend, as we see from the splendid bronze statue of a she-wolf probably dating from the sixth century BC, indicating that the gist of the legend had been accepted early in Rome.

Another strand of the foundation legend put forward Aeneas as the founder of Rome; as the story goes, after the sack of Troy by the Greeks he fled into exile carrying his father Anchises on his shoulders. This legend was established by the sixth century BC and was subsequently to be bound up with the developing complex cultural interaction between the Romans and the Greeks. In the first significant urban development the nature of Roman society and government is shadowy, although there may have been a joint community of Romans and Sabines (with a functional interpretation of the traditional story of the rape of the Sabine women). Around 625 come the first signs of permanent buildings in Rome, and the earliest public building was probably the Regia, a residence for the rulers, which later served as a senate house. Certainly an urban community was developing, and the appearance of religious buildings and sanctuaries suggests a degree of organization of public cults and communal religious activity.

Early Roman society was probably divided into clans (in common with many other Italic communities), in which all members had a personal name and a clan name. In the mid-Republic Roman males had two names: a first name (*praenomen*), and a family name (*nomen*); aristocrats often had a third name (*cognomen*) to identify a particular branch of the family, and sometimes a fourth (*agnomen*) to mark a special characteristic or achievement, for example, L(ucius) Caecilius Metellus Delmaticus. Women normally took the female form of the family name, for example, Marcus Tullius Cicero's daughter was Tullia. Early society would have been dominated by small groups of wealthy nobles who expressed their superiority

by fighting in war and by imposing public display on funeral tombs, partly influenced by the aristocratic societies in Greek colonies in southern Italy. Around 700 BC came the development of writing in Italy with an alphabetic script taken from the Greeks. Increasing literacy in Italic society assisted future developments by facilitating the recording and keeping of information that could then be used to advance state administration; government could now try to manage its population by organizing a census and establishing who was available for military service. The act of writing down the calendar showed a potential ability to organize state business and perhaps move to devise policy centrally.

No one could have predicted that the small city state of Rome would rise to dominate the Mediterranean world. In the early period it shared the Italian peninsula with other widely differing groups who all had their own cultural and social traditions. There existed about forty separate Italic languages or dialects before the success of Rome made Latin (spoken in Latium) the common language. In the central Italian highlands lived native peoples who were ethnically related to the Romans and spoke various forms of Italic languages related to Latin. Rome's persistent opponents, the Samnites, lived in the high Apennines, tending farms but also keeping pigs, flocks of sheep and herds of goats; they and others in southern Italy and Campania spoke Oscan. North of Rome the Volscians pursued the same lifestyle. Both groups periodically coveted the more fertile land on the plains of Campania and Latium. Other languages were Venetic (north-east Italy), Umbrian (central and eastern Italy), and Celtic spoken by the Gauls in the Po valley. In southern Italy many Greek communities had been established from the eighth century BC onwards; they were independent but normally copied the institutions, traditions and language of their mother-city. Indeed leading cities such as Cumae and Neapolis (Naples) were more sophisticated and culturally advanced than their Italic neighbours and retained a specifically Greek environment.

The Etruscans, whose origins remain obscure, spoke a non-Indo-European language and operated as a federation of city states with a distinct social system in which the ruling group was completely dominant over the mass of the people, who were virtual serfs. The religious practice of Etruscans was distinctive, using a number of sacred books and including ritualistic divination to discover divine intentions. They lived north of the Tiber in what is now Tuscany, and from the ninth century BC represented the important Villanovan iron-age culture, which stretched north and south of the Apennines down the peninsula beyond Rome. It was characterized by cremation of the dead (other iron-age cultures in Italy practised inhumation) and burial of the ashes in an urn in a deep shaft covered with a block of stone. Etruscan civilization was technically well advanced with sophisticated drainage and irrigation systems. They worked bronze and iron and produced fine-quality pottery, architecture, sculpture and painting, in which they

borrowed much from the Greeks with whom they interacted and had good trading relations. It is interesting that the thirteen altars discovered at Lavinium (Pratica di Mare), which allegedly had been founded by Aeneas, show a markedly Greek influence in design and religious thought. The Etruscans were well established by the eighth century, and the sixth and fifth centuries saw them develop an empire in the valley of the Po and in Campania in southern Italy. Etruscan influence was widespread, though this need not have meant an occupation or complete control of Rome. It would be better to speak of interaction rather than domination either culturally or territorially. Probably some Etruscans settled in Rome, but this was a two-way process since the Romans made up a vibrant independent community that was part of developments affecting the entire Mediterranean area. Indeed Roman borrowings are hard to trace, though the bundle of rods and an axe (*fasces*), that famous Roman symbol of magisterial authority, probably derived from Etruria; a miniature set has been found in a tomb at Vetulonia, one of the Etruscan cities. The rods, about 1.5 metres long and bound together by red thongs, enclosed a single-headed axe and were carried in front of a magistrate by his attendants (*lictores*), making his authority visible to all. Eventually the Etruscan Empire crumbled under pressure from the Gauls in the north and the Samnites in Campania, and the Romans overcame the heartland, partly by absorbing the ruling elites, which they supported against the lower orders.

From Kings to Consuls

What were the early institutions of the Roman state? There were originally three tribes subdivided into *curiae* (each apparently a local division into which citizens were born), and this was a crucial part of political and military organization. The traditional story is that Rome was ruled by kings, the seventh and last of whom, Tarquinius Superbus, was tyrannical and was overthrown by internal rebellion. This sounds like a traditional historical ploy to account for a change of government, and many and perhaps all of the details of these kings as individual characters are probably fictional. On the other hand, it is likely that Rome (as other Italian communities) was indeed ruled by kings. If the regal period was very roughly 625–500 BC, it probably created or consolidated social and political institutions, and advanced religious worship and the role of priests. If there is any truth to the idea that some kings were aggressive warriors, then there may have been a period of substantial conquest, which means in turn some attempt to organize an army and a move to establish and protect state boundaries by forcing other peoples to recognize them. The senate perhaps originally served as an informal advisory council chosen by the kings.

In the traditional account Servius Tullius was the sixth king (conventionally dated 578–535 BC). Whether he existed with that name does not matter, although it is possible that Tullius was identified with the Etruscan hero Mastarna, or Macstrna (as the emperor Claudius, *c.*AD 41–54, was to mention in a speech to the senate), who also appears in the famous wall paintings from a fourth-century BC tomb at Vulci illustrating mythological scenes and events from Etruscan history. In any case Servius Tullius had a significant impact, and important reforms are associated with him. He allegedly organized the Roman people according to a new tribal system and conducted the first census, on the basis of which the citizens were divided into units called 'centuries' according to wealth and property. The exact number of tribes is not known, but there were twenty-one in 495 and the increase to thirty-five was gradual (this total remained into the imperial period). The crucial consequence of these moves was a change in the basis of political power from birth to wealth and in what it meant to be a Roman citizen; this redefined the relationship between the individual and what he owed to the community. One objective was certainly to establish clearly the military obligations of citizens by identifying how many were physically capable of bearing arms and what kind of equipment they could afford. It is possible that the reform was connected with the adoption by Rome from Greece of the phalanx method of fighting. However, this had probably taken place sometime earlier, though it is plausible that since the phalanx required a substantial number of soldiers operating as a solid unit standing shoulder to shoulder, the more men available the better, and also that uniformity of armour and weaponry would help.

Another view is that the change was significant as a new way of organizing the army, with each unit (century) as a cross-section of the whole citizen body drawn from the new local tribes. This would blot out any previous regional loyalties or obedience to aristocratic clan-bosses, enhancing the power at the centre, whatever precise form that took. Therefore the reform of Servius Tullius probably had a political purpose too; the male citizens under arms divided into their units met as an assembly (*comitia centuriata*), which could vote against the interests of the narrow aristocratic clique who expected to control things, and perhaps for the leader who had given them a chance to make their feelings known. It is true that the system ascribed by our sources to Servius Tullius is overly complicated in respect of the management of wealth groups and is unlikely to fit an early date. But it may be that towards the end of the fifth century BC this early census arrangement was modified in line with the prevailing political, military and social situation.

As noted, the seventh and last king of Rome, Tarquinius Superbus, was reportedly aggressive, building up Rome's relationship with the Latins, but also cruel, provoking internal rebellion. It is difficult to recover exactly what happened at the

transition from monarchy to the Republic at the traditional date of 509 BC. It is possible that Tarquinius was regarded by aristocrats as a usurper and tyrant, who stirred up or relied on popular support against their interests. Archaeological evidence of burning and destruction in Rome suggests that there was a violent revolution, and the semi-mythical story of an intervention by Lars Porsenna, king of Clusium, adds another dimension. If it is true that he imposed a humiliating peace treaty on Rome, it is possible that Lars expelled Tarquinius before setting out to make war on the Latins. But Lars's defeat at Aricia in 504 undermined his influence, and in the aftermath of the removal of Tarquinius a group of aristocratic families combined to oust Lars and established a Republic with two chief magistrates (the consuls) in the hope of managing the state in their interests, though with concessions to the people and the army who made up the *comitia centuriata*. The senate remained as an advisory council for the chief magistrates.

Political divisions emerged as the young Republic developed, most noticeably between patricians and plebeians, a division often described as the 'Conflict of the Orders'. Later Romans thought that this division went back to early times, but it is more likely that it was the gradual result of new political struggles. In the later Republic the patricians were clearly demarcated within the nobility by dress and the ability to hold certain offices; the status was hereditary, being confined to the legitimate sons of patrician fathers. In the seventh century BC, patricians will have been rich landowners who under the kings had gradually acquired certain political and religious privileges that marked them out socially. Later, they held a large proportion of important offices and set out to exclude non-patricians from the consulship and from social integration. A law in the earliest Roman law code, the Twelve Tables (see p. 7), forbade intermarriage with non-patricians. During this period the plebeians emerged as a distinct group, possibly originally as a way of protecting themselves against the seemingly dominant patricians. Most, though not all, plebeians will have come from the poorest and most disadvantaged members of society, who perhaps served as light-armed troops. Better-off citizens served as heavily armed infantry and the richest as cavalry.

Under the pressure of debt and abusive treatment by their social superiors the plebeians apparently staged a kind of strike in 494 BC, withdrawing outside the city to the Sacred Mount. They must have had competent leaders of some wealth and education, since at least by the mid-fifth century they had succeeded in setting up their own organization with an assembly consisting entirely of plebeians (*concilium plebis*), and officials consisting of two tribunes and two aediles. By 449 there were ten tribunes of the plebs and they were held to be sacrosanct, so that any person who harmed them was reserved for divine vengeance; their role was to defend the person and property of plebeians. Plebeians steadily took increasing

responsibility for their own organization and protection; although the decisions of the *concilium plebis* were in a sense unilateral, they were backed up by solemn oaths, the tribunes of the plebs, and the threat of another walkout. Nevertheless in the early Republic the plebeians faced a serious problem; since they often farmed small plots perhaps consisting of only two acres that could not sustain a family, they expected to use the common land (*ager publicus*) acquired by the Roman state in warfare. Unfortunately, the rich citizens used their influence to occupy parts of this land for their own purposes, making life particularly difficult for the poor. It is easy to see how they could get into debt, fail to pay off a loan (either for corn or agricultural implements) and end up in debt bondage (*nexum*) under the harsh law. Popular agitation demanded that public land should be distributed in allotments that could be privately owned.

Against this background there was some kind of serious political disturbance in 451–449 BC, arising partly from demands by the plebeians that the laws of Rome be set out clearly and published. First a body of ten men (*decemviri*) was appointed (supplanting other magistrates) to run the state and draft laws. Then a second group of ten was appointed, though this descended into tyranny and they refused to demit office. The arch-villain was Appius Claudius, who notoriously attempted to rape the virtuous Verginia, whose father killed her rather than allow her to be dishonoured: 'Appius was demented with love for this exceptionally beautiful young virgin and after he had tried to entice her with money and promises and discovered that she was entirely fenced in by her virtue, he decided on a brutal and arrogant use of force' (Livy 3.44.4). This provoked another withdrawal by the plebeians, this time to the Aventine hill and the overthrow of the tyrants. It is not clear how much of this uplifting tale is true, but out of the turmoil the consuls of 449, L. Valerius Potitus and M. Horatius Barbatus, made new proposals that probably recognized plebeian institutions, particularly the tribunate and the aediles, and the legal validity of the plebiscites (decisions of the *concilium plebis*); citizens may also have been granted the right of appeal (against the actions of magistrates).

The other great consequence of the Decemvirate interlude was the issuing of the Twelve Tables, which are of enormous significance even though we do not have the original text. The Tables consist of a series of limited instructions and prohibitions that help to illustrate legal practice in archaic Roman society. The text published now is a modern reconstruction, but despite difficulties of interpretation the original archaic language and format suggest a genuinely ancient tradition. Examples of provisions for settling disputes are:

> If he (anyone) summons to a pre-trial, he (the defendant) is to go; if he does not go, he (the plaintiff) is to call to witness; then he is to take him.