

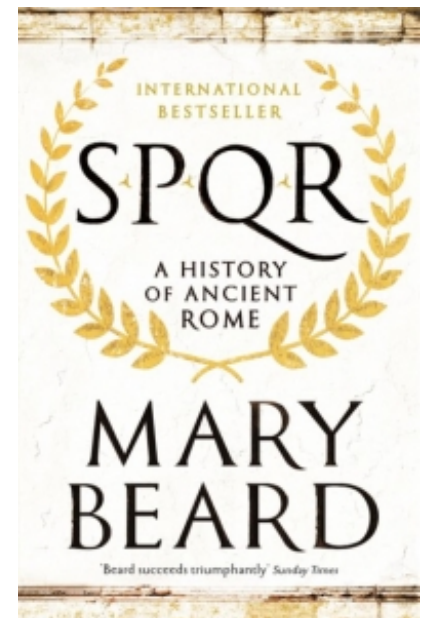
#IWD2016 Book Review: SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome by Mary Beard

*With **SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome**, the renowned Cambridge classicist **Mary Beard** presents a new history of 'the Senate and People of Rome', covering over 1,000 years and a diverse array of themes. **Marion Koob** applauds this superb book for its gripping narrative threads, its persuasive account of Rome's contemporary relevance and for drawing attention away from the colourful personalities of the Roman emperors to instead consider the structures and patterns of power through which they ruled. Put simply, this is an essential read.*

SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome . Mary Beard. Profile Books. 2015.

Accounting for the rise or fall of the ancient Roman civilisation is almost something of a rite of passage for each generation. Every couple of decades or so, someone undertakes the endeavour, in the process both reflecting new discoveries and the prejudices and anxieties of their epoch. It makes for brilliant historiography. Mary Beard, Professor of Classics at Newham College, Cambridge, as well as author of numerous books on the ancient world, is the next to step into the fray. And to call *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* anything less than superb would be doing it a severe injustice.

Starting at the earliest settlements of ancient Rome, Beard concludes her history at the moment that Emperor Caracalla granted Roman citizenship to all of his subjects, when, she argues, the nature of the Roman world irreversibly shifted. However, *SPQR* is not a straightforward account of what happened when, of political leaders or nit-picking about the details of battles. Instead, Beard brings her Rome to life by identifying themes, questions and relevance everywhere she treads. In so doing, she brings the reader into the historian's mind, deducing and reflecting on what evidence means, on the implied biases of various accounts and speculating intelligently where there is near to nothing to work with. Beard is also adept at highlighting recent evidence, showing that there is still much to be discovered about the ancient world.



Real-life characters prove excellent narrative threads, and the author uses many to guide her readers through her history. She starts her account not with the early settlers of Rome and the little evidence they carry, but in 63BCE, with what she names as Cicero's 'finest hour'. This moment is set right at the heart of the Roman Republic as a political conflict epitomising what fascinates most about the Romans. Gripping readers, this is a clever storytelling device – a 'flashforward' that then returns to the beginning of the story – and it works.

Interest in Ancient Rome remains high, whether directly or indirectly (its transition from a Republic to an Empire, for instance, haunts much of our science fiction). In her conclusion, Beard is clear that there is perhaps not much we can learn *from* the Romans, but that it is dangerous not to engage with their history. So much of our thinking about power, citizenship, beauty, empire and responsibility has been developed in conversation with their legacy. The author persuasively argues that it is vital to understand their provenance.



Image Credit: [Diego](#)

In 'Chapter Five: A Wider World', Beard examines the success of the emerging Roman Republic through the eyes of Polybius, a Greek hostage brought to Rome in 168 BCE, and perhaps one of the world's first political anthropologists. He carefully ponders as to what makes the Romans so successful and how this is translated into their culture.

Supported by large reserves of citizen and allied forces, along with a stable political structure, at the time Rome's military machine appeared nearly unstoppable. The gains of warfare had made Rome the richest nation of any in the known world. In fact, by 167 BCE, taxes were abolished. Save for a few levies, the government managed to run on the spoils of war. Military victories were built on a culture which encouraged young Romans to imitate their ancestors. Competition and ambition were encouraged among Roman elite society, creating a drive for further conquests and further gains. This was nowhere better exemplified than in the funerals of notable men.

In a funeral procession, the body was sat in an upright position, followed by family members wearing masks of the deceased's other prominent ancestors and costumes matching the offices they had held. An address would speak of the achievements of the deceased, and then of the family's. 'The most important upshot of this', Polybius concluded, 'is that the younger generation is inspired to endure all suffering for the common good, in the hope of winning the glory that belongs to the brave'. Through Polybius's voice, Beard vividly conveys various aspects of this muddled time in Roman history, teasing out shifts (mass migration, the complexity of literature) and themes (the interaction of Roman and Greek culture), which would otherwise have been difficult to bring together.

In 'Chapter 10: Fourteen Emperors', Beard takes a novel approach to the study of empire. Fourteen emperors, from Tiberius to Commodus, ruled over a stable and largely similar structure of imperial power. It is these structures, rather than their personalities, that are worth studying, the author argues. While much has been written about each individual emperor (many of whom had colourful reputations), their characters in fact mattered little, as the means of their rule and the day-to-day lives of their citizens remained relatively unchanged.

They all followed the precedent of Augustus, the first emperor, in measuring their success: through building grandiose works, flaunting their generosity to the people and displaying military feats. This was the standard by which the emperors were admired and criticised, and by which they judged themselves. For instance, the Colosseum, now one of Rome's most memorable monuments, combined these three aspects for the Emperor

Vespasian. It was a grand construction project, the celebration of a victory over Jewish rebels and an obvious mark of munificence to the Roman people.

The emperors, however, also inherited Augustus's problems: namely, an unclear method of succession, which generated family intrigues as well as military coups and was sometimes overcome by strategic adoptions; an uneasy relationship with the Senate; and a confusion in how their power might be represented and defined. Were the emperors gods? And if so, were their family and friends, if they declared them to be? Beard here makes a persuasive case for her approach of focusing on the structure and patterns of power, rather than individual personalities.

It is difficult to find anything negative to say about *SPQR*. It is an awe-inspiring achievement: gripping, yet all-encompassing; thoughtful and provocative, yet accessible; and above all, surprising. Who would have known that Julius Caesar might have invented the concept of life imprisonment (usual methods of punishment were otherwise death, fines or exile)? Or that Rome in Polybius's time was one of the most travelled states, with over half of the adult males in the city having seen something outside of its confines? Or that eating in, and living in the bottom floors of an apartment building, were signs of wealth? (The poor couldn't afford kitchens, and higher floors were at greater risk of collapse or fires).

Occasionally, a little more detail would be welcome. Perhaps about the day-to-day lives of the emperors themselves, for instance, or on the transition between these fourteen individuals and their successors. Otherwise, a few abrupt chapter transitions are disorienting, but more so because the rest of the book flows so well from one point to the next.

Through her chapters on social history, her study of individuals and her observations of Roman culture, Beard opens a window onto a society long gone, but with concerns sometimes frighteningly close to our own. Her excellent *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* is essential reading for anyone interested in politics or Roman history.

Marion Koob has a BSc in Government and Economics at the LSE and MPhil in International Relations at the University of Cambridge. She has worked in Polis, the LSE's journalism think-tank, and is now at the British Film Institute. [Read more reviews by Marion Koob](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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