



Rome: A History in Seven Sackings

Matthew Kneale

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"Kneale's account is a masterpiece of pacing and suspense. Characters from the city's history spring to life in his hands." —*The Sunday Times* (London)

Novelist and historian Matthew Kneale, a longtime resident of Rome, tells the story of the Eternal City—from the early Roman Republic through the Renaissance and the Reformation to Mussolini and the German occupation in World War Two—through pivotal moments that defined its history.

Rome, the Eternal City. It is a hugely popular tourist destination with a rich history, famed for such sites as the Colosseum, the Forum, the Pantheon, St. Peter's, and the Vatican. In no other city is history as present as it is in Rome. Today visitors can stand on bridges that Julius Caesar and Cicero crossed; walk around temples in the footsteps of emperors; visit churches from the earliest days of Christianity.

This is all the more remarkable considering what the city has endured over the centuries. It has been ravaged by fires, floods, earthquakes, and—most of all—by roving armies. These have invaded repeatedly, from ancient times to as recently as 1943. Many times Romans have shrugged off catastrophe and remade their city anew.

Matthew Kneale uses seven of these crisis moments to create a powerful and captivating account of Rome's extraordinary history. He paints portraits of the city before each assault, describing what it looked like, felt like, smelled like and how Romans, both rich and poor, lived their everyday lives. He shows how the attacks transformed Rome—sometimes for the better. With drama and humor he brings to life the city of Augustus, of Michelangelo and Bernini, of Garibaldi and Mussolini, and of popes both saintly and very worldly. He shows how Rome became the chaotic and wondrous place it is today. *Rome: A History in Seven Sackings* offers a unique look at a truly remarkable city.

Rome: A History in Seven Sackings Details

Date : Published May 15th 2018 by Simon & Schuster (first published October 19th 2017)

ISBN :

Author : Matthew Kneale

Format : Kindle Edition 433 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Cultural, Italy

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From Reader Review Rome: A History in Seven Sackings for online ebook

Vince Quackenbush says

I enjoyed this book. a history of Rome through seven sackings, it looks at Rome's reinvention after each crisis. When the Gauls sacked Rome in the BCE, Rome changed to dominate Italy, a finally Gaul and set itself on World domination. When she was sacked by the Goths in the CE 400s, the Western Empire disappeared and the Papacy arose. In the 1100s CE the Papacy reached its high point and then The Holy Roman Empire gained ascendency. In the 1500s CE, the Papacy confronted the Reformation and was invaded by The Emperor and could have been deposed. This period ushered in the Catholic reaction which actually was a sign of Catholic weakness. In the 1800s CE, the Italian reunification abolished, for a time, the papal states, then finally. One can easily see why why Italians look at the Church in askance. Finally the 1943 CE invasion of Rome by the Nazis, and the deposing of the Fascisti. This got me interested in the Anti-Semitism, and pro-Fascist sympathies of the Highest levels of the Catholic Church, and makes me want to read more about it!

Annarella says

A book I read like it was a novel. An interesting group of articles about the different sacks of Rome that is a history book and a telling of the city history.
Very interesting and fascinating.
Recommended.
Many thanks to Simon&Schuster and Edelweiss for this ARC

Thomas says

A very enjoyable read, beyond Ancient Rome I have had little to no interest in the history of the Eternal City. This book has however piqued my interest especially in the history of Rome up to and around the Renaissance, it brings to life many memorable events and characters and one can imagine the treachery and danger of being a Roman across all centuries.

Easily readable and relatable, not a hard book or a chore to get through. What slowed me down was my unfamiliarity with Roman and to a degree Italian history beyond the Roman Empire, which I am now happy about because I now have new interests to explore and research such as Robert Guiscard and the Normans.

The afterword makes for a very handy guide to the remnants of each sacking that still remain visible to this day. I for one am looking forward to my next visit to Rome and seeing it with fresh eyes.

Arjun says

Constructed essentially as an anthology series of historical sackings, this is an ambitious attempt at writing

the history of a city from its post-Roman origins without just a simple chronological narration. I think broadly speaking it works well and to Kneale's credit there is a lot of cross-referencing and comparative analysis of the different periods particularly in terms of demographics, economics, technology, food and architecture - all of which give a good sense of how we got to the present day.

Some chapters are more interesting and factually relevant to Rome as it is today than others. The sacking by Henry IV (1081), by the French under General Oudinot (1848) and the Germans during WW2 after Italy had surrendered (1943-45) are the standouts and unlike most books covering these events, Kneale writes from a uniquely Roman perspective. Useful for underscoring just what a brutal and often dark history belies such a great city (Garibaldi's attempted defence of the Republic in 1848 or the Ardeatine Massacre of 1944 being two examples within those chapters where the Italian perspective is much more valuable).

There are times when the narrative over 2,000 years becomes slightly overwhelming with such a huge cast of characters and it becomes somewhat hard to keep up (the twin Gothic chapters being particularly at fault for this). However, in general there are some fascinating stories presented here and the presence of some recurrent themes - e.g. realpolitik of (and between) various Popes, the prolonged mistreatment of Roman Jews or the building/re-building of some of the city's most famous monuments over the years - I think make this book a worthwhile read for anyone with an interest in Rome.

Emma says

Review to follow

Kiril Valchev says

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Zulfiya says

What a delightful reading experience. The Eternal City as it is known has witnessed and withstood a lot in its glorious and not so glorious history.

The authors explores the history of major events through the history of major battles and what preceded those events. The precedents are not only military, but historical, cultural, and religious. This is what makes this book so informative. The approach to the narrative structure is also quite original. The author first mentions one of the proverbial sackings, and then tells the backstory that explains why and how it was possible.

It also adds significant substance and meat to the story, and despite the somewhat original approach to the major story of Rome, the book also flows well and sounds harmonious and coherent.

Additionally, I found personal deviations about some of the historical participants quite engaging, and the book is full of those small gems.

I highly recommend it. It is not a brilliant book, but it is damn good.

Heather Mathie says

It's not very often that I read a review of a book and then realize that it's in my pile of books to read - but this happened here. For a change, I slightly disagree with the published review. I thought this was quite a good way to write about a city with so much history, but I do wonder if there were others the author could have used.

Josh says

I received this book as a Christmas present, but it sat on my shelf for a few months before I plucked up the courage to read it. I was almost afraid of what I would find. Given my deep interest in, and veneration of, classical civilisation, I didn't want to hear about the destruction of the eternal city by some greasy Gauls, lousy Ostrogoths, or pillaging Spaniards. I preferred to ignore this sad decline and wanted to revel in Rome's classical grandeur. I winced at the thought of ancient marble masterpieces being smashed and incinerated to make lime mortar, or the blood-hallowed stones of the colosseum, the most concentrated killing ground in history, being pillaged for St Peters. Give me conquering Caesar in his triumphal procession.

But this, I admit, is a rather silly, narrow-minded view of a city that has a much richer, and longer, history. Rome is a city that has been birthed again and again; its countless metamorphoses took it from backwater Latin town to epicentre of the word's greatest empire, then to the seat of its greatest religion, and finally to modern capital of a unified Italy. It was disaster just as much as triumph that has shaped Rome's cultural fabric. Fortunately, much of Rome's history lingers on in its surviving buildings – churches, temples, forums, piazzas, and palaces. These relics offer a snapshot of each of Rome's successive ages. History built atop history. Kneale, a resident for over 15 years, uses his intimate knowledge of Roman geography to great advantage. Through his detailed description of events, and augmented by excellent maps at the beginning of each chapter, history becomes geographically navigable in the mind.

There is something captivating about Rome. The mind reels at a “dizzying sense of time past and greatness lost”. By looking at seven major invasions between 387 BC and 1944 AD (Gauls, Goths, More Goths, Normans, Spanish and Lutherans, French, Nazis), Kneale is able to unpick Rome’s winding ways and separate the historical strata layer by layer. Rome is a great survivor; like some hardy bacterial colony, it has endured massive population collapse, from a bustling classical metropolis of over a million inhabitants, to a town of just a few ten thousands under Pope Gregory VII where the ancient forum was known as the ‘Campo Vaccino’ or cow-field. Each sacking served as a major turning point in the life of the city, and Kneale offers fascinating insights into Rome’s various incarnations. He travels previous Roman generations forward to each subsequent period and dissects what they would find reassuringly familiar, or disconcertingly different. This helps to give a vivid sense of Rome as an expanding, contracting, evolving, surviving, organism.

The book’s structure is formulaic but effective; each of the seven chapters is a tripartite chronicle of a particular invasion. The narrative begins with premonitions of doom, as the invading army is described and the historical backdrop fleshed out. Next, life inside the city walls is examined; some inhabitants are proudly defiant, others festering in fear, while some are plotting betrayal (all sieges but one succeeded only with the complicity of insiders). The chapter ends with a fall as the sack itself is played out – citizens murdered, damage wrought.

This formula works better for more recent events. Kneale gives a lively account of Garibaldi’s impassioned resistance against the French (he only retreated to the hills once his sword became so buckled from use it could no longer fit in the scabbard, declaring: “wherever we go, there will be Rome”). Most compelling is the section on the rise of fascism. Needlessly embroiled in war, abandoned by craven, self-serving leaders, and occupied by an erstwhile ally, many people led a silent, heroic resistance. “Centuries of cynicism and distrust of authority had borne fruit … They thwarted them with their humanity by refusing to be carried along by an ideology of fear and hatred … it was the Romans’ finest hour.””

The latter part of the book’s success may simply be due to the greater number of first-hand accounts that have survived. Earlier first hand accounts, however, can be just as colourful, such as that by the breathtaking self-aggrandizer Benvenuto Cellini, who aided in Rome’s defence against the armies of Charles V’s in 1527 during Rome’s most destructive sack. From the battlements he claims to have personally shot both the Duke of Bourbon and the Prince of Orange, in addition to single-handedly saving the Castel Sant’Angelo. Not all, Cellini boasts, “If I told all the great things I did in that cruel inferno, I would astonish the world.”

Kneale is best when portraying the everyday life of Romans through the centuries, from their attitudes towards health: “Though Rome now had several hospitals these were on the prayer side of the spectrum”, to culinary predilections: ancient Roman dishes, which were flavoured by a kind of fermented fish sauce, “would be more Thai than Mediterranean” to modern tastes. Kneale effectively captures both the squalor and splendour of Rome, which, though it has had its fair share of detractors (declaimed by John Ruskin in his day as a “nasty, rubbishy, dirty hole”), loses none of its charm to Kneale. His affection for the enduring spirit of Rome’s inhabitants and their proud resilience in the face of disaster shines throughout the book.

Scott Martin says

This work attempts to condense of the history of Rome into seven main sections, usually tied to when some foreign power or entity "sacks" the city, from the Gauls during the Republic to the Allies and Nazis fighting over the Eternal City in the latter stages of World War II. From the seven main "sackings", Kneale not only discusses the actual conquests, but offers context for what life in the city was like, the geo-political,

economic and social conditions. It is a mix of academic history and interesting tourist guide facts. It will not cover all aspects of Roman history, but it hits enough of the key points. This might be worth the read for a history buff who wants to go beyond the history described in a Rick Steves' guides. I think this would be a better hard-copy read as opposed to audiobook, but still, not a bad history of such a key world city.

Rajat Yadav says

As a novice in Roman history, I found this book to be a great initiation into this genre. Right from the 400s BC to the 20th century world wars, the book chronicles the seven major sackings that Rome and its inhabitants have faced. Curated with banal to highly important pieces of information, the book makes for an interesting read.

Towards the end of the book you would have successfully placed the Roman governmental structures over the years, especially the transition from a merit based Emperor style rule to a shadow theocracy, and later a fascist regime. You would learn a great deal about Roman Architecture, and about the geographical extent of the Roman Empire.

P.S - Do take note of the bibliography at the end. It is quite extensive, and a guide to future readings.

Athan Tolis says

Author Matthew Kneale serves as a truly enthusiastic guide through the history of his adopted home city, Rome. With three thousand years to take you through, he faces an important problem: he needs to “choose his battles;” he truly stands no hope of both telling the whole history and keeping your interest.

So he chooses to take you on a history of sieges (though “sackings” does sound more dramatic!)

Rome’s been besieged many more than seven times, but that’s OK, the idea is not to tell you about sieges and sackings, it’s to impart some of Rome’s history on you, and hopefully some of the author’s love and admiration. To tell you about how people lived, how they were governed, what they wore, what and how Romans ate, what they drank, how often they bathed, where they lived, where their masters lived and how their society was structured. And then, of course, how the siege went, that’s in there too!

The book would be incomplete without the careful reconstruction of the historical events and without portraits of the historical figures who turned Rome into a battlefield, which are all present and correct; the book is worth reading for the many intrigues alone.

With one exception, his first six sieges are spaced out by 500 years from one another, to give the city time to grow (or shrink!) and evolve. This is not about the sieges, it’s about Rome, bottom line!

So you start with Gaul Brennus, who ravaged Rome in 387BC after defeating its army at the battle of Alia, you move on to Visigoth Alaric, whose success on his third attempt in 410AD probably caused his death to malaria which he probably got in Rome the same year, and from him to the unsuccessful Ostrogoth Witigis who was thwarted by Belisarius in 538, only for his successor Totila to capture the eternal city two years later.

Next comes (German) Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV's three-year effort, that was crowned with success in year 1084, leading to his own coronation by his appointee Pope Clement III, followed by Norman Robert Guiscard's re-taking of the city to re-establish Pope Gregory VII, one of several who excommunicated Henry. (this was all extremely confusing!!!)

Rome was at its filthiest, but also at its grandest (excluding classical times) when Matthew Kneale brings us back, to tell the story of the unfortunate Pope Clement VII (a lesser member of the Medici family), who was undone by Emperor Charles V of Spain and his Lutheran Landesknechte in 1527. This was a proper sacking, probably almost as bad as that by the Vandals in antiquity (which is not much documented and does not feature in the book). Also, this marks the last time in this book when Rome was actually an important city, geopolitically speaking.

From there it's to the 1848 defeat of Garibaldi and Mazzini at the hands of the French, who'd come to reinstate the Pope, which of course was the preamble to the creation of the Italian state some fourteen years later. The book closes with the nine month German occupation of 1943.

The author makes a truly enormous effort to not only keep some type of narrative going, but also to revise the history you've just learnt and to recount the evolution of his city through time. You can't really hop around randomly between sieges and sackings, this is a book to be read linearly.

Regardless, and perhaps it's my fault for knowing so little, I've got to say I lost him often. There's quite simply a whole lot of history (and far far far too many names of buildings and monuments) packed in these pages. But I did gain a very good understanding about how the city changed through time, for the evolution of the papacy and its role in the history of Rome and I was introduced to a number of historical figures who stand a decent chance of staying in my memory.

If you know Rome, I suspect this is an indispensable book.

Importantly, I most genuinely enjoyed reading this. It accompanied me everywhere for about a week!

Carlos says

I'm so glad to have read this book, it was an amazing chronicle of all the historical centuries the city of Rome has gone through, in it you will find a little about Gauls, Murderous emperors, bloodthirsty barbarians, corrupt Popes, famous architects and artists , learn a little about the church schism and the birth of the Reformation, nazis and fascists . In summary you will get a piece of history served up in just small bites that won't make you feel full but will satisfy you (yeah I used a food pun....lol). In short if you love classical history then you will love this book.

Karl says

This book offers a great shorthand history of Rome. Written in an anecdotal and narrative style it is not dry. And if you like architecture, this will not disappoint.

Brian says

Mathew Kneale is primarily a novelist and he uses his narrative skills to great effect when recounting the story of Rome from the attack on the Capitoline hill by Brennus and his Gauls, famously forestalled by the alarm cries of sacred geese, right up to the Nazi takeover after the flight of Mussolini.

Kneale carefully sets the scene for each of his vignettes, picking out the salient details to paint a vivid picture of Roman life before each invasion. I was fascinated to discover, for instance, that just before the invasion of Aleric, Rome had over three hundred public lavatories. You would be hard put to find one these days.

A lot of this is familiar territory – the excesses of popes, the ambition of emperors, the development of the pilgrimage industry, the glamour of Garibaldi – but Kneale knits it all together adroitly, managing to create a coherent picture from the disparate parts. In doing so, he mimics the characteristic qualities of his subject, a city that over time has absorbed and assimilated all those who sought to conquer it and made them part of its complex and fascinating identity.
