



Rome: An Empire's Story

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The very idea of empire was created in ancient Rome and even today traces of its monuments, literature, and institutions can be found across Europe, the Near East, and North Africa--and sometimes even further afield. In Rome, historian Greg Woolf expertly recounts how this mammoth empire was created, how it was sustained in crisis, and how it shaped the world of its rulers and subjects--a story spanning a millennium and a half of history. The personalities and events of Roman history have become part of the West's cultural lexicon, and Woolf provides brilliant retellings of each of these, from the war with Carthage to Octavian's victory over Cleopatra, from the height of territorial expansion under the emperors Trajan and Hadrian to the founding of Constantinople and the barbarian invasions which resulted in Rome's ultimate collapse.

Throughout, Woolf carefully considers the conditions that made Rome's success possible and so durable, covering topics as diverse as ecology, slavery, and religion. Woolf also compares Rome to other ancient empires and to its many later imitators, bringing into vivid relief the Empire's most distinctive and enduring features.

As Woolf demonstrates, nobody ever planned to create a state that would last more than a millennium and a half, yet Rome was able, in the end, to survive barbarian migrations, economic collapse and even the conflicts between a series of world religions that had grown up within its borders, in the process generating an image and a myth of empire that is apparently indestructible. Based on new research and compellingly told, this sweeping account promises to eclipse all previously published histories of the empire.

Rome: An Empire's Story Details

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Author : Greg Woolf

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From Reader Review Rome: An Empire's Story for online ebook

Rebecca says

This was one of the books assigned for my current Open University module on the Roman Empire, although we are only required to read parts of it, not the whole text. I decided to read it from cover to cover as it explores the whole history of the empire, from its much-mythologised beginnings to the gradual end - an end so gradual that it's difficult to define exactly *when* the Roman Empire can be said to have ceased to exist.

I liked the fact that Woolf keeps things as chronological as possible and in some cases also illustrates points by looking at other similar empires - demonstrating in the process that no two empires can ever really be exactly the same. The timelines at the start of each chapter are also helpful in terms of giving the key events of an era and there are maps which show the extent of Roman territory at various points in its growth and decline. It's a relatively short book, so there's no time to go into huge amounts of depth, but it does give a good general outline - and there are suggestions for Further Reading at the end of each chapter if you do want to delve into a particular topic in more detail. This makes it a good starting point for anyone wanting to learn about Roman history.

Bonnie_blu says

2.5 Stars.

Woolf sets himself a very ambitious goal. He states (please pardon the long quote, but it is necessary): "My subject, however, is empire itself. How did it grow? What enabled it to resist defeats and capitalize on victories? Why did Rome succeed when its rivals failed? How did empire survive crisis, dig itself in, and replace chaotic campaigns of conquest with stability? How did empire come to coordinate the great flows of wealth and populations on which it depended? How did it evolve to face new needs and new threats? Why did it falter, regain its balance, and then shrink under a series of military blows until it was, once again, a city-state? What circumstances and technologies made the creation and maintenance of an empire possible, in just this place and just at that time? What institutions, habits, and beliefs suited Rome for the role? And what did the fact of empire do to all the beliefs, habits, and institutions with which the world had been conquered? What part did chance play in its successes and its failures?"

Very ambitious indeed, and unfortunately not accomplished. Woolf wanders from his thesis and loses focus throughout the book. He does not investigate any of the questions above in depth and fails to develop insightful answers. The book is more an introduction to ancient Roman history rather than an analysis of the concept of empire as a sociological and geopolitical entity or of how Rome does or does not meet that concept.

In addition, there are errors / omissions scattered throughout. A few examples:

Page 88: "At all stages of this economic growth the propertied classes led the way. No new commercial classes emerged, as the capital came from the social elites and they entrusted the management of these enterprises to their clients, freedmen, and slaves." Without doubt, wealthy landowners were the elites in Roman society; however, as Rome grew, the Equestrian Order (Knights) grew in wealth and influence, and were found at the highest levels of government. True, they were not a "new commercial class" per se, but as Rome grew, the Knights grew from a group with limited power to one with wealth and power to equal the

landowning elite. Of course with this newfound wealth, they often became landowners themselves. I feel Woolf's failure to recognize this group's development and contributions misleads the reader.

Page 105:

- "There were no easy frontiers before the Atlantic, and it took until the reign of Augustus to reach it." Julius Caesar conquered Gaul in the 50s BCE and not only reached the Atlantic, but crossed it to Britain.

- "The major tribal confederacies of temperate Europe could marshal armies numbered in the hundreds of thousands, were technologically on a par with Roman troops, and had impressive fortified sites, even if they did not possess an infrastructure of cities and roads." The tribes of temperate Europe were not as technologically advanced as Roman troops. They were amazed at the siege engines, fortifications (including nightly marching camps), etc. that Caesar's legionaries built quickly and almost effortlessly.

Page 141:

- "Despite granting amnesties to most of his [Caesar's] former enemies, and lavishing games and monumental building on the city of Rome, he failed to rally Rome around him." On the contrary, Caesar never lost the love of the great majority of the people, as evidenced by their horror at his murder and their overwhelming anger at the assassins. There was only one group who never "rallied" to Caesar: his enemies in the Civil War who he had pardoned and in many cases, awarded titles and recognition.

One final word: the editing is atrocious. On just about any given page, the reader can find noun-verb disagreement, incorrect verb tense, run-on sentences, sentence fragments, and more. I felt as though I was reading a freshman paper wherein the freshman did not even run a spelling / grammar check. This seriously detracts from the book.

For those readers who may wonder, my credentials are a Master's Degree in history, decades of research into ancient Rome, and almost as many years as an editor.

Jamie D. says

A good book covering the entire roman history within one book. As someone relatively new to the topic I found many parts hard to follow, but still worth the read.

Jan says

This is a introduction to the Roman Empire, which I would describe as "friendly" in the best sense of the word. In less than 300 pages, it touches on aspects of economics, religion, culture, and government spanning over a thousand years of history. While there are certainly better treatments of any individual topic, Greg Woolf gets a lot of credit for putting together a stellar bibliography for anyone who wants to delve more deeply. Each chapter boasts about 3 or 4 paragraphs of highly recommended reading, and the endnotes are about half as long as the main text itself, making me wonder how anyone writing a similar introduction to a historical topic could be taken seriously without providing such a variety of references.

For brevity, certain strengths of a good historical text are sacrificed, such as biographical elements of major figures; however, Woolf does a good job of briefly presenting alternative possibilities and viewpoints that make sense in light of the entire book's narrative. A good example would be the discussion of Constantine's Conversion. Was he a good Christian, a military pragmatism, or a traditional emperor seizing on a new cult

to bolster his power? All these are given a brief but sensible treatment, in the context of the larger themes of the story. Furthermore, the bibliographical support provides plenty of opportunity for more depth.

Of slight distaste is an inconsistency of tone (hip and slangy in certain chapters, repetitive in others) and a high frequency of grammatical errors.

Tallianna Vanamee says

Vom Niedergang und Aufstieg einer Weltmacht

Rom hat die Welt unterworfen und sie zivilisatorisch und politisch geeint. Souverän und stilistisch bravourös schildert Greg Woolf, wie es gelang, diesen bis heute einzigen Weltstaat der Geschichte zu sichern und ihm Dauer zu verleihen: ein packender Parcours durch 1500 Jahre Weltgeschichte - das neue Standardwerk. (Klappentext)

Der nachfolgende Text kann Spoiler enthalten.

Seit ich das erste Mal davon gehört habe, freue ich mich auf dieses Buch und wurde auch nicht enttäuscht! Der interessierte Laie, aber auch Fachpersonen erhalten hier einen tiefgreifenden Überblick über die Werdung der Stadt und des Weltreiches Rom, aber auch Einblicke über ihren Niedergang.

Woolfs Schreibstil ist sehr angenehm und klar, daher empfand ich das Buch nicht als trocken oder langweilig geschrieben (obwohl an ein paar kleinen Stellen der Fehlerteufel zugeschlagen hat – ja, ich sehe so etwas sofort). Trotzdem ist das Buch kein Happen, den man sich an einem Tag zu Gemüte führt, sondern er regt schon zum Nachdenken an und ganz allgemein dazu, seine kleinen grauen Zellen anzustrengen.

Sehr dankbar war ich über die den Kapiteln vorgestellten Zeitangaben, die noch einmal die Regierungszeiten der Kaiser und wichtige Ereignisse genannt haben. Natürlich hat mein braves Studentengehirn damals all diese Daten auswendig gelernt und so wäre es für mich eigentlich nicht mehr nötig gewesen ... hust. Ein paar Karten über die Ausdehnung des römischen Reiches wie auch einige Farabbildungen am Schluss runden alles ab. Hierbei möchte ich feststellen, dass ich alles als E-Book gelesen habe und dort alle Abbildungen doch recht klein sind – auf dem Desktop sieht man es dann deutlicher und in seiner ganzen Farbpracht. Daher empfehle ich, gerade bei Fachbüchern, die Print-Ausgabe.

Zum Schluss dürfen eine ausgedehnte Literaturangabe, ein Glossar der Fachbegriffe und ein Personen- und Sachregister nicht fehlen.

Für mich war dieses Buch ein absoluter Leckerbissen, der mich doch wieder daran erinnert hat, warum ich mein Studium mit solcher Hingabe angegangen bin. Jeder, der sich für dieses Thema interessiert, wird an diesem Buch über kurz oder lang nicht vorbeikommen.

Richard Hessney says

My interest in the classical world keeps luring me back to fiction and nonfiction about Rome and Greece. In this fairly scholarly but still accessible work, Prof. Woolf explores how the Roman Empire developed, what

the concept of empire meant to the Romans, how Rome differed from other ancient empires, and how the soldier-emperors of the Late Empire were preoccupied with problems on the frontier and mostly ignored politics in Rome. What seems to be missing is an in-depth account of Roman military prowess and tactics. Major campaigns and wars are dealt with in passing, but, since the author states Rome was an "empire by conquest," it's curious that the how of that conquest isn't given more emphasis. At the end of the day, it's a very solid one-volume history.

Jeremy says

History of the empire of Rome, with the emphasis being on empire - Woolf focuses on the idea of empire and what it meant over the centuries. I found this to be a really interesting way to look at ancient Rome, as it gave an interesting perspective particularly from the average Roman citizens's (or subject's) point of view. At the end of each chapter Woolf gives an enlightening and thorough recommendation list for further, more in-depth reading on the topic just discussed. It was a well written and interesting introduction to the Roman empire.

Legens says

Accessible and pleasantly written general history of the Roman Empire. Chapters dealing with chronological political history and thematic chapters alternate. The former present a good overview, especially for readers with limited previous knowledge of the period discussed, but it is the latter in which the book really shines due to the author's wide and deep scholarship. Both primary sources and scholarly treatments of antiquity are discussed with intimate understanding.

Scott says

Excellent overview of the history of the Roman Empire, from inception to conclusion. Chapters provide several different vantage points of the empire but all are presented within a thoughtful context. Highly recommended as an introduction.

Chris says

Like nearly every Tyler Cowen book rec, this book covers a ton of ground but assumes a lot. I was doing some heavy Third-Year-Latin-Junior-Year-of-HS lifting to recall exactly how the first/second triumvirates differed. If you've got a basic narrative already, this rips along basically covers all the "how they did this empire thing" points quickly and cleanly.

Patrizia says

A very dense and short history of the Roman Empire. I would say it gives a good, general overview without

going into much detail. What bothered me most of all is that there is an unmissable amount of mistakes (sentence structure, grammar, repetition) that suggests poor editing. That certainly dampened my enthusiasm for this book.

Overall, it is certainly not a bad book if you aim for a very generic overview of some key events of the Roman Empire. It is however quite ambitious for it to try tell an Empire's entire story within just 300 pages (in my editon). Once in a while the book veered off topic to deal with a single case/person for quite a while. That bothered me, because it meant there was even less space for an already rudimentary explanation of key concepts.

What I did appreciate were the timelines at the beginning of most chapters. They were quite helpful to read, especially as only the most important events are listed (which makes the whole thing a bit more comprehensible).

Beware, there is no element of storytelling in this. The text itself is dry and oftentimes reads like a listing of what went on during certain time periods. That certainly could have been more well-made.

I'm torn whether to recommend this book, but do not regret reading it.

Jeff Wilson says

I knew almost nothing about history before 1000 AD. I have wanted to better my understanding of the Roman Empire for some time now and when I came across a one volume history of Rome, I thought I found a good way to do that. In the end, it turned out that I learned a great deal about Rome. This book, however, wasn't the sole source of my understanding. It is written (for some reason) for an audience that already knows Roman history. I was able to read the book because it's well written and easy to follow, but every page is literally filled to the brim with information. In order for me to understand the author, I had to read a section of a chapter and then spend a some time googling various roman history sites to fill in any information that was missing because the author assumed that I already knew it. I think, probably, that it was my desire to know more about this time period that kept me reading the book in this fashion. Ordinarily I wouldn't have the patience to keep this sort of thing up. In the end I have a much better understanding of something that I knew almost nothing about. So...objective achieved, I guess.

I would not recommend this book to a casual reader. If you have a strong ancient history background, then you would most likely enjoy the book.

Vicki Cline says

This book tells the story of Rome from its founding in the 700s BC through the end of the Western empire in 476 AD and the shrinkage of the Eastern empire down to a small area around Constantinople in the late seventh century. The chapters dealing with historical events alternate with chapters about cultural and economic issues that have a bearing on the events. It's a very interesting way to read history - you get to absorb what happened and think about the overall impact of the events. Each historical chapter starts with a list of pertinent events with their dates, and all the chapters end with a section describing other books that might be of interest relating to the topic. I would love to read more history presented in this way.

Karl F. says

To cover more than a thousand years of people's history in less than 300 pages is no easy task. The author's argument in *Rome An Empire's Story* is that it is persistence and survival that needs to be explained, not the decline and fall. In this he is most successful.

Rome's genius lay in the ability to recover from crisis after crisis. Its' success rested on the synergies engineered between imperialism on the one hand and aristocracy, slavery, family, city, on the other. Rome's history ends with the emergence of its three heirs: western Christendom, Islam, and Byzantium in the 7th century.

Riley Gardner says

"When a society makes monuments it reveals a lot about collective attitudes to time and the community. First it affirms the importance of history. Second it asserts - however nervously - confidence in posterity, that there will be a future audience or readership. Finally it imagines a community stretched out in time, those to whom this event or this person mattered, and those to whom it will still matter" (294).

This one was a doozy to get through. Woolf's goal is ambitious, but also a bit disappointing for the average reader. I say AVERAGE reader, because that's not who this book is aimed for. If you're looking for a step-by-step overview of the history of Rome, don't read this. If you have a sufficient knowledge of historical patterns, European/Roman history, yeah, sure, go for this book.

That being said, Woolf's writing is fascinating but DRY AS A DESERT. I felt like I was thrown into Wikipedia articles half the time, with names and numbers and places I had no concept of. The book is one of concepts, ideas, and questions - not history. That bad? Nah. Disappointing for someone looking for a history of Rome, as the book initially promises? Indeed.

Honestly I didn't know what was happening up until the fall of the Republic and Christianization of the Empire. It gives some amazing insights into that worth thinking about, but ultimately it left me more frustrated than enlightened.

3.5/5 for trying and for Woolf being a genius, but a dull writing style and confusing construction.
