



Ancient Rome: The Rise and Fall of An Empire

Simon Baker

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This is the story of the greatest empire the world has ever known. Simon Baker charts the rise and fall of the world's first superpower, focusing on six momentous turning points that shaped Roman history. Welcome to Rome as you've never seen it before - awesome and splendid, gritty and squalid.

From the conquest of the Mediterranean beginning in the third century BC to the destruction of the Roman Empire at the hands of barbarian invaders some seven centuries later, we discover the most critical episodes in Roman history: the spectacular collapse of the 'free' republic, the birth of the age of the 'Caesars', the violent suppression of the strongest rebellion against Roman power, and the bloody civil war that launched Christianity as a world religion.

At the heart of this account are the dynamic, complex but flawed characters of some of the most powerful rulers in history: men such as Pompey the Great, Julius Caesar, Augustus, Nero and Constantine. Putting flesh on the bones of these distant, legendary figures, Simon Baker looks beyond the dusty, toga-clad caricatures and explores their real motivations and ambitions, intrigues and rivalries.

The superb narrative, full of energy and imagination, is a brilliant distillation of the latest scholarship and a wonderfully evocative account of Ancient Rome.

Ancient Rome: The Rise and Fall of An Empire Details

Date : Published (first published October 24th 2006)

ISBN :

Author : Simon Baker

Format : Kindle Edition 448 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Ancient History, Cultural, Italy

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Nikki says

Simon Baker's Ancient Rome: The Rise and Fall of an Empire is a good introduction to Roman history, covering various key points in the history of Rome. Probably not the same key points that someone else would choose, but he makes a decent case for the importance of each stop on the tour. Some people's reviews say that if you have the most basic grasp of Roman history, this is too simple: I wouldn't say so. I have a GCSE and an A Level in classical studies, but the effect was a very similar kind of 'tour' of Roman history that just picked out different stopping points. So there were some things I didn't know much about at all.

One thing that is a little disappointing is the transitions between each chapters. It isn't really made clear how the transitions between the different time periods were made -- it goes straight from Constantine, for example, to the attacks on Rome by Alaric, without covering the intervening time at all. Even a little timeline at the start of each chapter would've helped.

Still, Simon Baker's prose is pretty readable and accessible. If you're not especially interested in the topic, I still wouldn't recommend this, as despite the six turning points it uses, it's still a 400 page volume. A Very Brief Introduction it ain't.

All in all, for me it was okay, but I'll be donating my copy to the local library rather than keeping it.

Larry Armstrong says

I found this book informative and thoughtful, a great help for me in understanding the events and people throughout Roman history. It was a good basic introduction to the history. I especially liked Baker's handling of Augustus. The concentration on major figures in the history gave me more "pegs" to hang Roman culture and life on.

Ben says

I absolutely loved this book. Very engrossing storytelling about some of the key figures of the Roman empire. Some of the politics gets very complex, with lots of different twists and turns in the plot, but these are effortlessly negotiated. Would definitely recommend to someone who is new to Roman history for a fascinating introduction to the subject.

Babak Fakhamzadeh says

The book accompanies a BBC TV series with the same name, focussing on six major events in Roman history:

- + The revolution triggered by Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, around 130BC, as the tribune of the people, starting the processes which led to power shifting away from the nobility to the people.
- + The civil war fought by Pompey and Caesar, resulting in the unification of the empire under one man.
- + The last Julio-Claudian emperor and paranoid Nero, being more interested in the (Greek) arts than administering an empire.
- + The crushing of the Jewish rebelling in 70AD by the later emperor Titus.
- + Constantine's rule as emperor which eventually saw the introduction of Christianity as the state religion.
- + The sack and fall of Rome, under the influence of Romanized Goths, under Alaric, and, later, the Huns, under Attila.

Here are a few interesting tidbits I picked up from the book, partially in relation to *Jesus Was Caesar: On the Julian Origin of Christianity*:

- + Policy changes installed by Augustus during his reign, related to sexual mores in general and adultery in particular, appear very Christian. Indeed, sexual chastity was already one of the defining classifications of Christians when Constantine introduced it to the empire at large.
- + Augustus' mausoleum is still partly standing, in Rome.
- + There is no surviving account of where the Rubicon was, the river which separated Italy from Gaul and across which military leaders were not allowed to take their armies. This is the river Caesar crossed when he lamented that the die had been cast.
- + When Octavianus considered his nickname, he entertained the possibility of having himself called Romulus, after Rome's founding father. However, rejecting the association that might conjure up of fratricide, he went for 'Augustus', which derives from the art of augury, the ability to read divine signs, for example from the innards of sacrificed animals.
- + Augustus was treated as a god, particularly in the eastern provinces.
- + The date of Christmas was moved to coincide with pagan religious holidays, that is, the winter solstice. Augustus birthday was on 23 September. There doesn't seem to be an accepted original date for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, though the general consensus seems to be this was in September or October.

- + Early images of Jesus depict him beardless. Hadrian, of the wall, as emperor, made the position of emperor much more accessible to the common man, through his extended travels and the relative ease with which his audience could be sought. Therefore, not only did he make the position of Emperor more accessible, but also the religious role of all emperors since Caesar, that of Pontifex Maximus, the exact same title which later became attached to the popes.

Hadrian, as opposed to the emperors before him, was also the first to sport a, neatly cropped, beard. And this around 125AD. Particularly the outer provinces benefited from his presence.

The book's very well written, giving a riveting account and very much bringing to life events which shaped Roman times. My only gripe is that the existence of Jesus is taken as a fact, a sad shortcoming as there are no

historical sources with any validity from which this can be deduced. For a book which claims to be grounded in historically verifiable sources, this is an unnecessary, slip up.

Omar Masood says

Given the length of the Roman Empire (and as advertised this book covers the origins of the empire from a small city-state), its breadth, its complexity, and its historical importance it is impossible to go in depth in a book of this length. Roman specialists should find a lengthier, more detailed book but for those who are new to Rome (like me), or seeking to acquire just a general understanding of one of the most important--and arguably the most important--civilization in world history this book passes with flying colors.

Pierre Verwey says

This book gives a condensed overview of the rise and fall of the Roman Empire in one sweep, using six key moments to tell the epic story of one of the greatest Empires the world has ever seen.

Considering this history spans over 700 eventful years, one needs to accept from the onset that even the best account of its history will, in some way or another, fall short to fully tell its sensational history. Though there must be countless books dealing with particular aspects of Rome's history, Id say Baker does a sterling job of writing something which is exciting to read, and simultaneously gives a decent overview of the core elements of Rome's spectacular rise and, 7 centuries later, whimpering decline, all in under 500 pages.

I simply could not put this book down, as each key-point becomes a thrilling exposition of the dilemmas, intrigues, crises, plots and subplots around the power struggle for control of an Empire, which, for its day, was perhaps at least a millennia ahead of its time. Just when I finished one section, thinking - it cant get more interesting than this, Baker would introduce the next part, (happily glossing over the duller bits), and launch straight into the following epic saga, weaving existing threads into an even more fascinating story, without allowing you to even catch your breath.

I was left with a great introduction to Ancient Rome, and though I read the book really as background to my true objective: The rise and fall of the Constantinople as the seat of the second Roman Empire, namely, Byzantium, leading up to the rise of Islam and the coming of the Crusades), I have to admit Baker gave such a brilliant account to the fascinating world of Ancient Rome, that I will no doubt return to retrace some of the intriguing stories touched upon, ones which I could never quite place in its proper historical context. (Carthage, Masada, Queen Zenobia of Palmyra, the origins of the Catholic Church the similarities of Ancient Rome's political system and that of Modern America - Id better just stop before I get carried away by something not even touched upon by Baker - a short history of modern plumbing)

I highly recommend this book if you want to be introduced to Ancient Rome, and are looking for a decent armchair overview that is neither overly scholarly, nor a 500 page extension of a wikipedia entry. Baker will give you a thrilling ride that will allow you to contextualise Rome's 700 year history, and allow you to make wonderfully unexpected connections between things you've always wondered about.

Kevin Keating says

Part of the rating I give for this book is for the companion movie series. The history seems good and compelling, but the movie is even better - well-acted and impressive. Kids in school really like the movie. The book follows it almost exactly. Picks 6 or so periods in Roman history and details them. Only thing missing is an overview or timeline, but that's ok.

Alcibiades says

Never thought by focusing on a handful key persons in the history of Ancient Rome one could actually get a better picture of the empire than any other accounts.

Alejandro says

Highly recommended history book. It reads like a drama, highlighting the most important events and rulers of ancient Rome. Rome wasn't built in a day and it didn't fall in one either. There are lessons to be learned from the mistakes of the Romans.

Lee says

Found this book to be a helpful introduction to Roman history. Not a great deal of depth into some of the more complex issues, but does a great job of giving the reader a direction to go for future reads.

Mike Parka says

After reading Mary Beard's S.P.Q.R., which was focused more on dispelling some of the myths surrounding Rome's history and shedding light upon the lives of ordinary people, I wanted to learn a bit more about the big, legendary characters and the huge events that shaped the ancient world. This book delivered big time.

Initially, I wasn't sure if the format will work for me. Each chapter is focusing on the life of one historical character and they picked a few most important ones from Rome's history. It actually works surprisingly well. You get plenty of background information, so it's not just simple biographies and the big events are explained really well.

So if you want to learn more about the Roman Empire with the focus on the most well known characters and events - this is your book. Very enjoyable read.

Rowdy says

I had an interest in learning about the general history of the Roman Empire, and I didn't want to read a textbook either. This book was definitely the answer because it read like a novel and made reading a history book entertaining. The drama of Roman war and politics was brought to life throughout. I definitely learned quite a bit about the Roman Empire and didn't feel bored while reading the book. Good read.

Esteban del Mal says

If you, like me, don't know much about the Roman Republic, the Roman Empire it spawned, or the impact of Roman culture on the subsequent millennia beyond what you saw on television when men in golden breastplates flogged and stapled history's most successful anarchist to a cross of wood between Paul and Jan Crouch's sobs and pleas for money, you could do worse than read this book. Though largely artless, it is not naively so and proves as unrelenting as any anonymous, sweaty, bloodthirsty beefcake in fish scale bikini briefs in its presentation of the epochal moments that gave form to that lodestar of classical civilization.

Rome, at least mythological Rome, was founded first on murder, and then as a sanctuary for the detritus of other societies -- criminals, exiles, refugees, their tired, their poor, their huddled masses. Then these castoffs invited their neighbors to the city, ostensibly in observance of a religious festival, only to steal their womenfolk so they could make babies. Babies that would grow up not to invite neighbors to do anything other than to submit to Rome or be put to the sword. With such violent origins, one is moved to wonder if their hymns would keep time with the Star Spangled Banner.

A popular history from BBC Books, I cannot help but think that author Simon Baker is, at times, addressing the United States in a roundabout fashion. Perhaps this is self-consciously nationalistic of me because the paranoid Puritanical founding of my own country casts such a long shadow. Maybe he has merely succeeded in touching upon the overarching themes native to all civilizations with the conceit to aspire to imperialism. It amounts to the same.

Romans, like Yankees, soon tired of their kings (Etruscan, by the bye, from whom we inherit the word *fascism* because they would carry a bundle of elm or birch branches bound together with an axe at its center called a *fasces*), ran them off and founded that most remarkable and fragile of things, a republic. A republic that gave lip service to the political freedom of its citizens, but nevertheless vested the power of the kingship in two elected consuls that would share power for a set period of time and that, in practice, came from the wealthiest two percent of adult Roman males. Yet even so, the memory of one man rule would stay with Romans and, in times of crisis, dictatorial powers would be ceded to that one happy man to do as he saw fit to restore order and preserve the republic.

But Rome would succumb to triumphalism despite its high-mindedness. Riding the wave of its economic and military successes -- made almost exclusively on the backs of the middle and lower classes and through the strategic application of pre-emptive wars of self-defense -- Baker notes:

In becoming a superpower, Rome, so it was said, abandoned the very values with which it had won its supremacy. At the pinnacle of its achievement, the virtues that had made the Roman republic so successful failed it and were lost forever.

An idealistic man by the name of Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, a military hero and the grandson of Scipio Africanus, himself famous for having saved the young republic from the wrathful genius of Carthage's Hannibal, would attempt to redistribute lands he perceived as unjustly taken from the citizen militia who,

while fighting Rome's wars of conquest, would see their properties go untended, fall into arrears, and then bought up on the cheap by the aristocracy.

In the first politically motivated murder of the republic, Tiberius would be killed and his mangled body unceremoniously dumped in the Tiber River.

Then would come the Caesars, the obsolescence, the decline, and the monotheistic statism. As I write these last words, my eyes wander to a Roman coin that I purchased some months ago and which I have worked at cleaning nearly daily. The profile of some emperor or other adorns one side; the image of an entire man holding what appears to be a bow, or perhaps even a plow, the other. One day I will set to examining it more closely in the hopes of dating it. Maybe I'll even try to decipher the Latin that haphazardly rings it. However, I will only do these things in the vein of an antiquarian. Our history cannot be found on any coin or written in any book. It can only be found in us, and I sometimes despair that it will never be overcome.

Mike Templet says

I have never found a history book that had me so wrapped up in a story that stay up late to see what happens next. While Baker admits he can't prove everything he is saying undeniably true it is his search for motive in these long deceased figures that makes the read intriguing. What he does offer is facts, dates, and widely recorded historical events all tied together. I have gone back and read it several times over now and live it.

Hao Nguyen says

In the book Ancient Rome by Simon Baker, there are many different stories of many leaders of Rome. The book tells us of how the Roman Empire came to be and what happened to it. The book is made up of great tales about the leaders of Rome. It shows how some leaders led their empire to power and how some failed to do so. The book also shows how the Roman Empire fell from its great power.

I liked how the book told brief stories about every leader and their life times. It got me interested on how the leaders are different. Some leaders were also very similar. I liked that they explained how specific leaders successfully led the Roman Empire to victory and how the other leaders made it fall. My favorite part of the book is how the author talked about the economy of the Roman Empire. I liked comparing how different our economy is now from the Romans' economy then.

I didn't like how long the book was because that made it feel like a school history book. I would rather it be only one story. There book kept switching to different main characters because it was full of stories about different leaders. There are many things about the Roman Empire I have learned so the book wasn't as interesting. The stories were many years apart from each other which made it less interesting because I would rather have one story in the same time period.

The book was interesting to read but it started out pretty boring in the beginning. I liked how the book didn't skip around and how it was all in order by time periods. The book was still very much like a history book. I think it was also very educational. Although I enjoyed some parts of the book, it didn't really make me want to keep on reading. It took me a long time to finish this book.
