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Mike Duncan. *The Storm before the Storm: The Beginning of the End of the Roman Republic*. New York: Hachette Book Group, 2017.

Book Review

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Mike Duncan's *The Storm before the Storm: The Beginning of the End of the Roman Republic* is a dramatic tale of the political turmoil engulfing Rome before the rise of Caesar, Pompey Magnus, and the Caesar-Pompey Roman Civil War as portrayed in Rome. The fact that Mike Duncan is renowned as a history podcaster should not be cause to avoid this both relevant and bloody book. Duncan's book is a rich survey of the period when the Republic began its slide from its noble trappings to a state existing solely for the benefit of roughly a hundred noble families and the equestrian order or class who held the reins of the Roman Republic economy. Duncan astutely works in the Roman political structure, which is far more complex, with seemingly a series of check and balances by different offices and assemblies.



Figure 1. *Destruction* from *The Course of the Empire* by Cole Thomas, c. 1833-1836.

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Duncan's overall thesis seems to anchor itself upon the fact that the Roman Republic's political aristocracy was unable to cope with its military and political ascendancy in the *Mare Nostrum*. With the defeat of Carthage and the subjugation of the tribes of Spain, Rome ruled much of their known world. What upset the economic balance was all the new wealth and slaves flooding into Rome. With the defeat of Carthage, Rome now controlled the silver mines of Spain. Duncan, though, does not explore if this sudden dramatic influx of wealth caused inflation, but such a massive infusion surely caused some inflationary pressures. In turn, that infusion would have put greater economic pressure on the smaller land holdings owned by individual Roman farmers.

In a circular fashion, Duncan addresses this by noting that there soon seemed to be a fire sale of land that the top one-hundred families were adding to their already substantial estates. In turn, those farmers became in essence a free "serf," bound to that family and who was expected to vote for those of the estate standing for election, or they became part of the new urban masses. In turn, this led to the economic pressure of needing to subsidize a grain dole for those now dispossessed from the land. The other major unresolved political crisis was there were still at this time two Italys, Roman Italy and the Italian Italy whose residents the Romans did not treat as Roman citizens. Their status was usually one of Allied cities or *Socii*, but as they lacked citizenship, were subject to arbitrary actions with no legal recourse.

Think of both of those elements as the third rails of Roman Republican politics. In addition, Romans either represented the established families that comprised the majority of the Senate, or those Senatorial reformers and the "plebs," the free Romans of lower classes. Moreover, elections were held by tribal vote in which thirty-five tribes—four urban and thirty-one rural—would assemble on the Field of Mars and vote for candidates. Here is seen the rise of populism in terms of a political tool to rise to power that Caesar would use with great effect. However, to hold many of the offices, one first needed to have done their time in the legions, a stint of ten years, as it was mandatory for office. But with this rise of populism and now class baiting, Duncan lays out how the competing factions began using political violence, to include murdering foes and dumping their bodies and those of their supporters in the Tiber.

The end state reached was laws would be passed—and then either ignored or simply undone by the next faction to come into power. Rome had reached a state of political paralysis, which was even more harmful as it lacked any meaningful bureaucratic administrative machinery. In turn, Duncan lays out how each of the major civil wars that convulsed Rome further weakened the Republic.

The first was by the native Italians who rose against Rome. Eventually, though victorious, Rome granted these various tribes citizenship rights, but much of Italy was devastated in the conflict. Of greater portent for the future was the political competition between Marius and Sulla, and its impact lasted down into the era of Julius Caesar. The outcome of Sulla's victory was the use of a dictatorship not just as a temporary measure as in the past but as one for as long as deemed critical for the reestablishment of order and security. This set a dangerous future precedent for Rome. So did Sulla's use of proscription, a method to pay his troops by declaring either an opponent or someone wealthy to be an enemy, having them killed, and seizing their assets for the Republic.

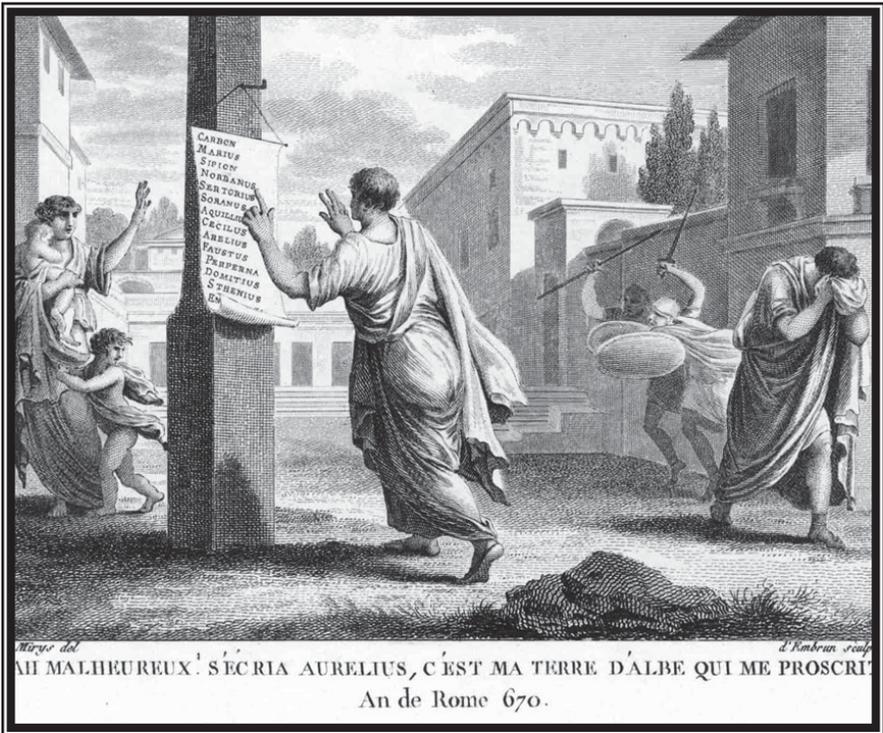


Figure 2. Numéro 138 dans *Figures de l'histoire de la république romaine accompagnées d'un précis historique*, Paris, an VIII. Silvestre David Mirys, c. 1799. A proscription list—once published, citizens were under an obligation to kill those upon it.

*The Storm before the Storm* could have helped the new or even casual reader by use of a technique that Jeff Sahara uses in all his works. He gives the readers a condensed thumbnail of the major actors in his volumes, enabling the

reader to have a pre-immersion of who is who. That is even more important in certain cultures, as we have various Julia, Marius, Pompey-like names and such that can easily confuse and frustrate the reader (and one supposes the Romans as well). Worse, though, is the failure to adequately proof the book. There are at least twelve instances this reviewer found of a capital U that was mistakenly transposed in exchange for other letters, usually words with the letters ch but not in all instances. This capital U sticks out like the proverbial sore thumb.

Yet Duncan with *The Storm before the Storm* admirably fills a gap for not just the casual reader of Roman history. Duncan here made the period of the Republic at the height of its military and political success accessible, rendering a great service for the field. Moreover, Duncan allows his readers to draw their own conclusions on the current state of both American and global political affairs through the use of Roman history rather than interject in any heavy handed way the “this means that” school of writing. In all, Duncan provides a fine read. *The Storm before the Storm* is a book readers will not start and forget about.