

Henrik Mouritsen, *Politics in the Roman Republic* [book review]

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Abstract:

If his goal was to produce an "original and readable book" that would be "important for all students and scholars of Roman history and of politics in general", as the back-cover copy claims, then Henrik Mouritsen has succeeded. In this slim, 172-page entry in the *Key Themes in Ancient History* series from Cambridge University Press, Mouritsen not only engages with the giants in Roman political history but challenges them, and the status quo of scholarship on the Roman Republic, while lucidly offering a vibrant reading of populism, republicanism, and political legitimacy in the Roman world that will give any readers with an interest in the subject much to ponder.

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Article:

Henrik Mouritsen, *Politics in the Roman Republic*. Key themes in ancient history. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. xii, 202. ISBN 9781107651333. \$23.99 (pb).

If his goal was to produce an "original and readable book" that would be "important for all students and scholars of Roman history and of politics in general", as the back-cover copy claims, then Henrik Mouritsen has succeeded. In this slim, 172-page entry in the *Key Themes in Ancient History* series from Cambridge University Press, Mouritsen not only engages with the giants in Roman political history but challenges them, and the status quo of scholarship on the Roman Republic, while lucidly offering a vibrant reading of populism, republicanism, and political legitimacy in the Roman world that will give any readers with an interest in the subject much to ponder.

Following a brief introduction that highlights the pitfalls inherent in studying the Roman political system, such as the Romans' own multifaceted definition of the *res publica* and the characteristic dichotomy between constitutional theory and political practice, the first chapter, "*Senatus Populusque Romanus: Institutions and Practices*," begins with Polybius, whom Mouritsen acknowledges as integral to any study of Roman politics. Polybius, he argues, is a critical source not only because of his contemporary description of the Roman government, but because his

parceling out of power among various offices has had a profound influence on the study of Roman politics, though, as Mouritsen will argue in Ch. 3, Polybius was wrong about many features of the Roman constitution, particularly his identification of democratic elements. After a brief discussion of Cicero's *De re publica*, Mouritsen turns to the function of the *comitia*. He argues that there was a fundamental paradox embedded in the Roman political system: the people had unlimited power in theory, but virtually no way in practice of expressing that power. Yet, despite the de facto, if not de iure, impotence of the assemblies, Mouritsen argues that the assemblies were a critical component of both the ceremony and the long-term legitimacy of the Roman state. He notes that "there is no evidence that Roman elections...were ever driven by programmes or policies that turned them into political events in a modern sense" (43-4). Rather, the assemblies were a "essential" component of the "symbolic construction of the Roman state as a community of free citizens" (50), and the sole conferees of legitimacy, albeit legitimacy not derived from any sort of democratic ideals.

The second chapter, "Leaders and Masses in the Roman Republic," bears a title similar to that of the honorary volume dedicated to Zvi Yavetz edited by Malkin and Rubinsohn, but draws more heavily from Mouritsen's earlier work on plebs and politics. Mouritsen takes care to highlight the significant impact that recent scholarship into symbolic features of civic inclusion has had on the study of Roman politics, seeing as how the Roman assemblies had very limited participation and very rarely rejected the proposals put in front of them. A discussion of how the physical places used for political activities force a reevaluation of the number of citizens that would be able to participate in *contiones* and voting processes leads to the conclusion that the *comitia* functioned purely as the bestowers of legitimacy, and only symbolic legitimacy at that; the *populus* itself was "a vital but essentially passive source of public legitimacy" (61). The discussion of the symbolic nature of the assemblies is followed by a provocative argument about the role of *contiones*. Mouritsen takes issue with the attempt to find in *contiones* an expression of popular sovereignty, which he describes as "a new 'orthodoxy'" (62). He quickly dismantles any notion that these public meetings were "foci of popular power" (64), and suggests that Keith Hopkins' identification of *contiones* as rituals is more reflective of their actual purpose. Mouritsen argues that it was unimportant who showed up to public meetings, provided only that some representatives of the Roman people made an appearance. *Contiones*, therefore, were important primarily because of their symbolic, indeed ideological, function. As Polybius had noted, the Roman state was built, at least ideologically, on a partnership between the various social classes. The stability of the Roman state was in large measure a result of this partnership, as the elites were forced to frame their position and success by accepting that their power came from the people.

The third and final chapter, "Consensus and Competition", is the longest of the three chapters, and the most interesting. Here Mouritsen focuses on the social and political factors that contributed to both the initial stabilization and the eventual destabilization of the Republican constitution. Mouritsen begins by deftly outlining the perils of periodization – that is, slicing the period from 509-44 BCE into neat Early, Middle, and Late chunks – before engaging in a long reevaluation of the ubiquitous political terms *optimates* and *populares*. Mouritsen, taking his lead from earlier arguments by Christian Meier and Hermann Strasburger, convincingly demolishes any vestiges of ideological definitions for these terms. Mouritsen finds particularly unhelpful attempts to link politicians deemed *populares* with democratic principles of political institutions.

He argues that the terms are polyvalent, and in many ways transpolitical. Mouritsen relies heavily on Sallust and Cicero's *Pro Sestio*, the locus classicus for any discussion of the two terms, to support his argument. The conflict of the Late Republic becomes, for Mouritsen, "a complex mix of conventional power struggles, personal vendettas and factional strife, with an added element of elite class conflict" (129) rather than any sort of conflict between two distinct groups denoted by the terms *populares* and *optimates*. What may be seen as a conflict between these groups was really just divisions among the elites. The people had a deeply-rooted symbolic power, as Mouritsen discussed in the previous chapter, but very rarely did anyone advocate for them on their behalf. Even the tribunes, Mouritsen argues, were not representative of the democratic element, as Polybius suggested, but rather an anomalous feature of the ancestral constitution that ostensibly represented the people's interest but was in reality a tool of the elite. The restoration of the tribunate after Sulla's reforms should therefore be seen not as a restoration of the democratic element but a reaction against what a significant portion of the elites viewed as a Sulla-induced tyranny. Politics, then, insofar as it relied on the symbolic legitimacy conferred by the Roman *populus*, became a contest of popularity, where popularity was a malleable concept, shaped and reshaped according to the particular needs of the elites in their continual struggle for public honor and dignity. In the end, this struggle led to the creation of "rhetorical strategies" which "could be used to justify open conflict rather than compromise, a development that would have serious consequences for the Roman Republic" (164). Mouritsen concludes the third chapter by stating that the Roman political system worked "on the premise that the bodies which held the power did not exercise it" (166), that Rome "triumphed despite her constitution, because she had found a *modus vivendi* which neutralised the weaknesses inherent in her political make-up" (166), and that the end of the Republican system was caused by a ruling class that seemed "to lose its collective sense of purpose and instinct of survival, becoming seemingly oblivious to the fundamentals on which its ascendancy depended" (168).

The book ends, however, rather suddenly, with a short discussion of the role of the Social War in the dissolution of the Republic. If this reviewer was left wanting anything at the end of the book, it would have been either a more thorough expansion of this two-page discussion, or a tidier conclusion to match the succinct introduction. That minor quibble aside, however, this book has much to offer students of all stripes. Mouritsen challenges many of the standard interpretations about the role of the people in the Roman constitution. In doing so he spends equal time critically engaging with the secondary and primary sources. Thus, the bibliography is full and multilingual, with no significant omissions for a survey of scholarship on Republican politics. The footnotes are inclusive but not overwhelming, more often expository than argumentative, and useful for tracing the influences on Mouritsen's argument. The book has no production flaws that I noted, save a single omitted conjunction on p. 123.

In short, this book ought to be required reading in any advanced undergraduate or graduate course on the Roman political system, and scholars would do well to add it to their libraries. Mouritsen engages with the major theories and theorists from Mommsen to the present day, and weaves together a coherent and thoroughly modern treatise covering the salient features of Roman political discourse. Of course, everyone may not agree with all of Mouritsen's arguments, but with this book he has created the perfect anti-Carthage: a fertile ground for future growth in the study of the Roman Republic.