

THE  
STORM

BEFORE

THE  
STORM

THE BEGINNING OF THE END  
OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC



MIKE DUNCAN

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*The Beginning of the End of the Roman Republic*

MIKE DUNCAN



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*For Brandi  
for everything*

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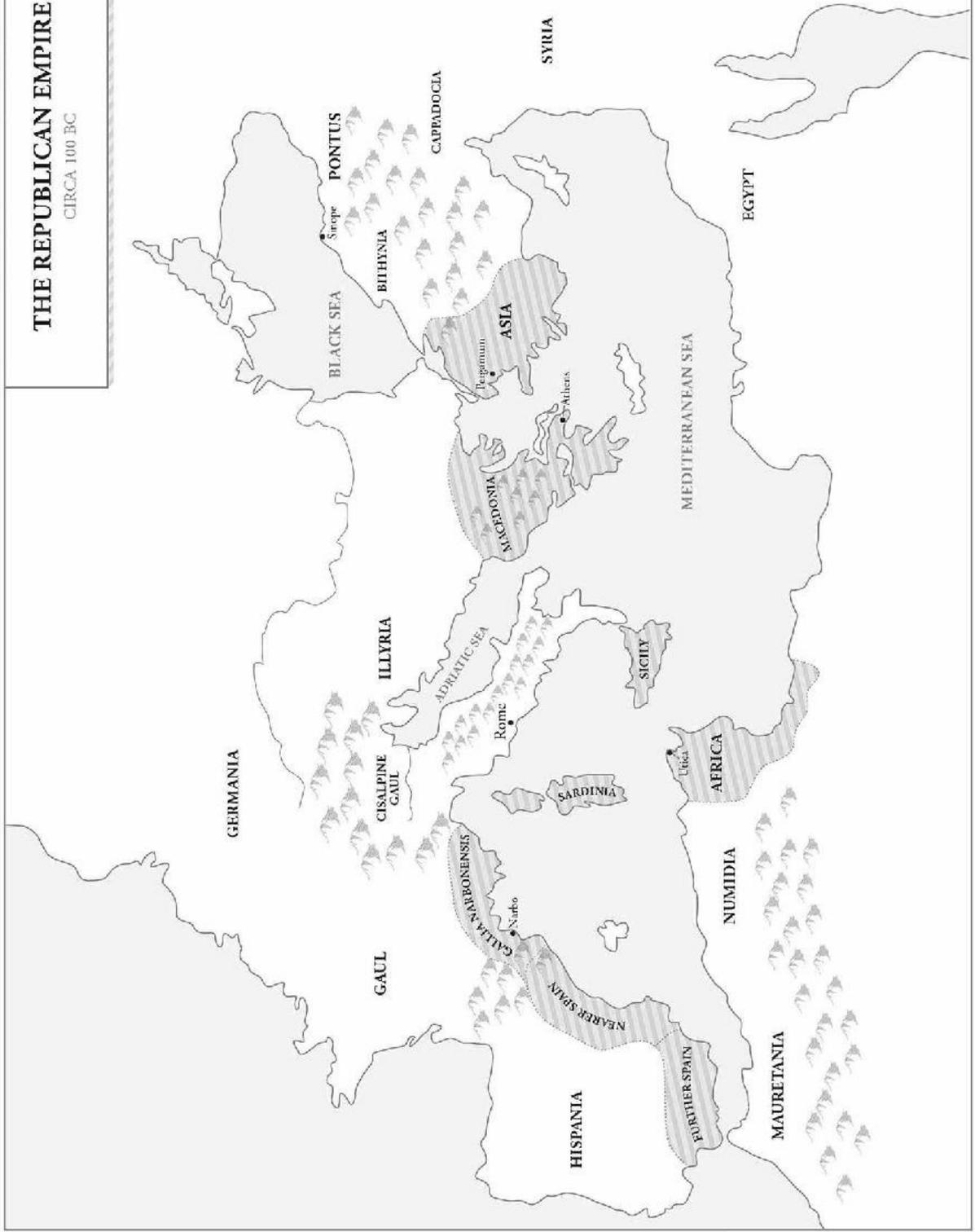
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# THE REPUBLICAN EMPIRE

CIRCA 100 BC



## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

NO PERIOD IN history has been more thoroughly studied than the fall of the Roman Republic. The names Caesar, Pompey, Cicero, Octavian, Mark Antony, and Cleopatra are among the most well known names not just in Roman history, but in human history. Each year we are treated to a new book, movie, or TV show depicting the lives of this vaunted last generation of the Roman Republic. There are good reasons for their continued predominance: it is a period alive with fascinating personalities and earth-shattering events. It is especially riveting for those of us in the modern world who, suspecting the fragility of our own republican institutions, look to the rise of the Caesars as a cautionary tale. Ben Franklin's famous remark that the Constitutional Convention had produced "a Republic... if you can keep it" rings all these generations later as a warning bell.

Surprisingly, there has been much less written about how the Roman Republic came to the brink of disaster in the first place—a question that is perhaps more relevant today than ever. A raging fire naturally commands attention, but to prevent future fires, one must ask how the fire started. No revolution springs out of thin air, and the political system Julius Caesar destroyed through sheer force of ambition certainly wasn't healthy to begin with. Much of the fuel that ignited in the 40s and 30s BC had been poured a century earlier. The critical generation that preceded that of Caesar, Cicero, and Antony—that of the revolutionary Gracchi brothers, the stubbornly ambitious Marius, and the infamously brash Sulla—is neglected. We have long been denied a story that is as equally thrilling, chaotic, frightening, hilarious, and riveting as that of the final generation of the Republic. This book tells that story.

But this book does not serve simply as a way to fill in a hole in our knowledge of Roman history. While producing *The History of Rome* I was asked the same set of questions over and over again: "Is America Rome? Is the United States following a similar historical trajectory? If so, where does the US stand on the Roman timeline?" Attempting to make a direct comparison between Rome and the United States is always fraught with danger, but that does not mean there is no value to entertaining the question. It at least behooves us to identify where in the thousand-year history of the Roman Empire we might find an analogous historical setting.

In that vein, let's explore this. We are not in the origin phase, where a collection of exiles, dissidents, and vagabonds migrate to a new territory and establish a permanent settlement. That would correspond to the early colonial days. Nor are we in the revolutionary phase, where a group of disgruntled aristocrats overthrow the monarchy and create a republic. That corresponds to the days of the Founding Fathers. And we aren't in the global conquest phase, where a series of wars against other great powers establishes international military, political, and economic hegemony. That would be

the twentieth-century global conflicts of World War I, World War II, and the Cold War. Finally—despite what some hysterical commentators may claim—the Republic has not collapsed and been taken over by a dictator. That hasn't happened yet. This means that *if* the United States is anywhere on the Roman timeline, it must be somewhere between the great wars of conquest and the rise of the Caesars.

Further investigation into this period reveals an era full of historical echoes that will sound eerily familiar to the modern reader. The final victory over Carthage in the Punic Wars led to rising economic inequality, dislocation of traditional ways of life, increasing political polarization, the breakdown of unspoken rules of political conduct, the privatization of the military, rampant corruption, endemic social and ethnic prejudice, battles over access to citizenship and voting rights, ongoing military quagmires, the introduction of violence as a political tool, and a set of elites so obsessed with their own privileges that they refused to reform the system in time to save it.

These echoes could be mere coincidence, of course, but the great Greek biographer Plutarch certainly believed it possible that “if, on the other hand, there is a limited number of elements from which events are interwoven, the same things must happen many times, being brought to pass by the same agencies.” If history is to have any active meaning there must be a place for identifying those interwoven elements, studying the recurring agencies, and learning from those who came before us. The Roman Empire has always been, and will always be, fascinating in its own right—and this book is most especially a narrative history of a particular epoch of Roman history. But if our own age carries with it many of those limited number of elements being brought to pass by the same agencies, then this particular period of Roman history is well worth deep investigation, contemplation, and reflection.

*Mike Duncan*  
Madison, Wisconsin  
October 2017

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## PROLOGUE

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# THE TRIUMPH OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC

Who is there so feeble-minded or idle that he would not wish to know how and with what constitution almost all the inhabited world was conquered and fell under the single dominion of Rome within fifty-three years?

POLYBIUS<sup>1</sup>

PROCONSUL PUBLIUS SCIPIO AEMILIANUS STOOD BEFORE the walls of Carthage watching the city burn. After a long, bloody siege, the Romans had breached the walls and pierced the heart of their greatest enemy. The Carthaginians had put up a fight, forcing the Romans to conquer the city street by street, but at the end of a week's fighting the Romans prevailed. After systematically looting the city, Aemilianus ordered Carthage destroyed and its remaining inhabitants either sold into slavery or resettled further inland—far away from their lucrative harbor on the coast of North Africa. Long one of the great cities of the Mediterranean, Carthage was no more.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, seven hundred miles to the east, consul Lucius Mummius stood before the walls of the Greek city of Corinth. For fifty years, Rome had attempted to control Greek political life without ruling Greece directly. But persistent unrest, disorder, and rebellion had forced the Romans to intervene repeatedly. Finally, in 146 BC, the Senate dispatched Mummius to end these rebellions once and for all. When he breached the walls of Corinth he made an example of the rebellious city. As with Carthage, the legions stripped the city of its wealth, tore down buildings, and sold its inhabitants into slavery.<sup>3</sup>

By simultaneously destroying Carthage and Corinth in 146, the Roman Republic took a final decisive step toward its imperial destiny. No longer one power among many, Rome now asserted itself as *the* power in the Mediterranean world. But as Rome's imperial power reached maturity, the Republic itself started to rot from within. The triumph of the Roman Republic was also the beginning of the end of the Roman Republic.<sup>4</sup>

THE ROAD TO Rome's triumph began in central Italy six centuries earlier. According

to the official legend, twin babies Romulus and Remus were found abandoned beside the Tiber River by a she-wolf who suckled them back to life. When they came of age the twins resolved to found a city on the spot where they had been discovered. But an argument over where to place the city's boundary markers led to a quarrel; Romulus killed Remus and became the sole founder of the new city of Rome. The legendary founding date is April 21, 753 BC.<sup>5</sup>

The oft-told story of Romulus and Remus is obviously a myth, but that does not mean the story is pure invention. There is archeological evidence that shows human habitation dates back to the 1200s BC with permanent settlements by early 900—roughly corresponding to the legendary timeline. Contrary to the myth, however, the location of Rome has nothing to do with fortuitous encounters with friendly wolves, but rather strategic economics. Rome sits nestled in a cluster of seven hills commanding one of the few stable crossings of the Tiber. Most of the early Romans were farmers, but the location allowed them to control the river, establish a marketplace, and defend themselves in case of attack. Their small community was soon stable and prosperous.<sup>6</sup>

Rome spent its first 250 years as just another minor kingdom in Italy. As records from these early days were nonexistent, later Roman historians relied on the oral tradition of “The Seven Kings of Rome” to explain the early evolution of their city. Though the evidence was slim, the Romans believed that most of their core public institutions traced their roots to this semimythical monarchy. The first king, Romulus, organized the legions, the Senate, and the popular Assembly. The second king, Numa, introduced priesthoods and religious rituals. The sixth king, Servius Tullius, reformed the Assemblies, conducted the first census, and organized the citizens into regional tribes for voting. But though the later Romans credited the kings with laying the political and social foundations of the city, they also believed that kings were anathema to the Roman character. The Roman Kingdom ended abruptly in 509 when a group of senators chased the last king out of the city and replaced the monarchy with a kingless republic.<sup>7</sup>

The new Roman Republic was not a freewheeling democracy. Families that could trace their lineage back to the original senators appointed by Romulus were known as the *patricians* and by both custom and law these families monopolized all political and religious offices. Anyone outside this small aristocratic clique was called *plebeian*. All plebeians—whether poor farmer, prosperous merchant, or rich landowner—were shut out of power. It did not take long for the plebs to agitate for equal rights. As the historian Appian says: “The plebeians and Senate of Rome were often at strife with each other concerning the enactment of laws, the cancelling of debts, the division of lands, or the election of magistrates.” The running battle between patrician and pleb became known as the Conflict of the Orders.<sup>8</sup>

About fifteen years after the founding of the Republic, a debt crisis among the lower-class plebeians finally led to a great showdown. Incensed at arbitrary patrician abuse, the plebs refused to muster for military service when called to face a looming foreign threat. Instead the plebs withdrew en masse to a hill outside the city and swore to remain there until they were allowed to elect magistrates of their own. The Senate yielded and created the Plebeian Assembly, a popular assembly closed to patricians.

This Assembly would elect tribunes who acted as guardians against patrician abuse. Any citizen could seek sanctuary with a tribune, at any time, for any reason. By sacred oath the tribunes were declared *sacrosanct*—within the city limits of Rome not even a consul could lay a hand on them. They became sentinels against the tyranny of the senatorial aristocracy.<sup>9</sup>

But though tension between patrician and pleb helped define the early Republic, Roman politics was not a class affair. Roman families organized themselves into complex client-patron networks that worked down from the elite patrician patrons through an array of interconnected plebeian clients. Patrons could expect political and military support from their clients, and clients could expect financial and legal assistance from their patrons. So though the conflict between patricians and plebs occasionally led to explosive clashes, the client-patron bonds meant Roman politics was more a clash of rival clans than a class war.

What truly bound all Romans together, though, were unspoken rules of social and political conduct. The Romans never had a written constitution or extensive body of written law—they needed neither. Instead the Romans surrounded themselves with unwritten rules, traditions, and mutual expectations collectively known as *mos maiorum*, which meant “the way of the elders.” Even as political rivals competed for wealth and power, their shared respect for the strength of the client-patron relationship, the sovereignty of the Assemblies, and wisdom of the Senate kept them from going too far. When the Republic began to break down in the late second century it was not the letter of Roman law that eroded, but respect for the mutually accepted bonds of *mos maiorum*.<sup>10</sup>

**T**HOUGH SOMETIMES DIVIDED internally, the Romans always fought as one when faced with a foreign threat. Romulus stamped the Romans early with a martial spirit and rarely did a year go by without some kind of conflict with a neighbor. Occasionally these seasonal skirmishes erupted into full-blown wars. Starting in 343, the Romans became locked in a long war with the Samnites, a nomadic people who populated the hills and mountains of central Italy. Waged over the next fifty years, the Samnite Wars eventually sucked the rest of Italy into an anti-Roman coalition. When Rome defeated this coalition in 295 they became undisputed masters of the peninsula.<sup>11</sup>

But that victory only led to an even greater conflict: the Punic Wars. As Rome grew in strength during the 300s, the prosperous merchant city of Carthage had been rising in North Africa. By the time the Romans conquered Italy, the Carthaginians had pushed their way onto the island of Sicily and would soon be moving over to Spain. The two budding empires inevitably clashed, and for the next hundred years Rome and Carthage battled for control of the western Mediterranean.<sup>12</sup>

Rome was nearly defeated in 218 when the great Carthaginian general Hannibal invaded Italy, but the stubborn Romans refused to surrender. In fact, they were soon able to spread the conflict throughout the Mediterranean. In an attempt to shut down Hannibal’s supply lines, the Senate sent legions to attack Carthaginian lands in Spain. When they discovered Hannibal sought an alliance with King Philip V of Macedon, the Senate ordered a fleet to Greece. Finally the great hero of the war, Scipio

Africanus, led an invasion of the Carthaginian homeland in North Africa. There he defeated Hannibal at the Battle of Zama in 202. Carthage surrendered.<sup>13</sup>

Emerging from the crucible of the Punic Wars, Rome was no longer merely a regional power—it had become *the* dominant power in the Mediterranean. But the Senate resisted taking direct imperial control over the territories they now commanded. The final treaty with Carthage was surprisingly lenient. It stipulated a number of punitive clauses—the Carthaginians owed an annual cash indemnity and were forbidden from fielding an army or a navy—but other than that, Carthage retained its traditional domains in Africa and was free to govern itself.<sup>14</sup>

The Senate also wanted no part of ruling the Greeks and Macedonians. Having successfully kept Macedon out of the war, the Roman fleet withdrew back across the Adriatic. The plan was to leave Greece to the Greeks but, much to the Senate’s consternation, King Philip V of Macedon intentionally violated a treaty obligation and Rome was obliged to send legions east again. In 197, Philip paid for his provocative miscalculation when the legions crushed him at the decisive Battle of Cynoscephalae. Philip agreed to confine himself to Macedon and not make further trouble. But though Greece was now at their mercy, the victorious Romans declared in 196: “The Senate of Rome and T. Quinctius, their general, having conquered King Philip and the Macedonians do now decree and ordain that these states shall be free, shall be released from the payment of tribute, and shall live under their own laws.” The Romans had not come to conquer the Greeks, but to set them free.<sup>15</sup>

But though the Senate eschewed direct imperial rule over the “civilized” Carthaginians and Greeks, they showed little hesitation annexing “uncivilized” Spain. Attracted by lucrative silver mines, Rome kept its legions in Spain after the Punic Wars to ensure Spanish silver made its way into Roman temples. Roman conduct in Spain was riddled with double-dealing, extortion, and periodic atrocities. This led to rapid cycles of insurrection and pacification that in turn led the Senate to formally organize the Spanish coast into two permanent provinces: Nearer Spain and Further Spain. In 197, they joined Sicily and Corsica as some of the earliest overseas provinces of the Roman Empire.<sup>16</sup>

**T**HIS WAS THE world into which Publius Scipio Aemilianus was born in 185 BC. The son of an ancient patrician family, Aemilianus was adopted by the childless head of the Scipione family—making him legally the grandson of the great Scipio Africanus. Adoptions like this were a common way to cement alliances inside the Roman aristocracy, and Aemilianus grew up inside the most powerful family in the most powerful city in the world. Raised to expect a distinguished public career, Aemilianus never doubted that it was his destiny to be a great leader. In time he would serve with distinction in all three of the Republic’s principal imperial spheres—and then serve as one of the principal authors of Rome’s ultimate imperial triumph.<sup>17</sup>

Aemilianus’s first taste of action came in Greece when his natural father, Lucius Aemilius Paullus, brought his seventeen-year-old son along on campaign to observe how Rome conducted a war. In June 168, Paullus’s legions crushed the Macedonians, deposing its young, ambitious king, Perseus, who had tried to overthrow the

hegemony of Rome. He watched as his father seized the Macedonian royal treasury, enslaved upward of three hundred thousand people, and literally erased the Kingdom of Macedon from the map. What had once been the Kingdom of Alexander the Great was now divided into four small republics.<sup>18</sup>

After this harsh settlement, however, the Senate returned to their habit of ruling with a light hand. They demanded the inhabitants of the four new Macedonian republics continue to pay taxes, but at half the rate they had been paying to the kings of Macedon. If you managed to survive the war and not get sold into slavery, life under the Romans was pretty good.<sup>19</sup>

In the midst of his conquest, Aemilius Paullus also took a thousand prominent Greeks hostage to secure the good behavior of their kin. Among them was a brilliant politician and scholar named Polybius. A civic leader from the city of Megalopolis, Polybius had counseled neutrality toward the Romans in its wars with Macedon, which was enough to mark him as a dangerous element. But though Polybius was now slated for banishment it would prove a fortuitous calamity. When the Roman senior command passed through Megalopolis, the teenage Aemilianus borrowed books from Polybius, and their subsequent discussions created a friendly bond. Paullus arranged for Polybius to spend his exile in Rome and tutor his son in rhetoric, history, and philosophy.<sup>20</sup>

Under Polybius's tutelage Aemilianus embraced a new Greco-Roman spirit that was sweeping the age. The flood of educated Greek slaves into Italy led an entire generation of young nobles to become fully steeped in Greek literature, philosophy, and art. Some more conservative Romans railed against the importation of Greek ideas and believed they eroded the austere virtues of the early Romans. But while young leaders like Aemilianus reveled in Greek culture, they never questioned Rome's right to rule the world. And despite conservative moral agonizing, there was nothing soft about Scipio Aemilianus, who believed that obedience was taught with a whip hand. He would be in a prime position to be that whip hand when those who chafed under Roman rule began to rise up and the Senate decided to finally teach the Mediterranean obedience.<sup>21</sup>

**W**HILE POLYBIUS SPENT his exile in Rome, he came to admire the Roman Republic—or at the very least came to believe that Roman power was irresistible and that his fellow Greeks better get used to it. An energetic observer of the world, Polybius took endless notes and maintained extensive correspondence that allowed him to make a thoroughgoing investigation of these obscure Italian barbarians who were now masters of the universe. Eventually Polybius would write a history of Rome to explain how and why the Romans had risen so far so fast. Polybius argued that beyond their obvious military prowess, the Romans lived under a political constitution that had achieved the perfect balance between the three classical forms of government: monarchy—rule by the one; aristocracy—rule by the few; and democracy—rule by the many.<sup>22</sup>

According to Aristotelian political theory, each form of government had its merits but inevitably devolved into its most oppressive incarnation until it was overthrown.