

Format de citation

Gregory Coates: Rezension von: Frederik Juliaan Vervaet: Reform, Revolution, Reaction. A Short History of Rome from the Origins of the Social War to the Dictatorship of Sulla, Zaragoza: Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza / Sevilla: Editorial Universidad de Sevilla 2023, in sehepunkte 24 (2024), Nr. 6 [15.06.2024], URL: <http://www.sehepunkte.de/2024/06/38933.html>



copyright

Cet article peut être téléchargé et/ou imprimé à des fins privées. Toute autre reproduction ou représentation, intégrale ou substantielle de son contenu, doit faire l'objet d'une autorisation (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).

Frederik Juliaan Vervaet: Reform, Revolution, Reaction

The years 91-79 BCE hold a crucial position in the decline of the Roman Republic, as the first time when Roman politics dissolved into full-scale civil war and autocracy. The events of this period are well-covered in general narratives of the Late Republic. But there is a gap in the English-language market for a narrative history dedicated to these years, providing a detailed account of events and analysis of the key socio-economic processes at play.

This is the task F.J. Vervaet sets himself with this new book. His narrative proceeds in simple chronological order, from the build-up to the Social War and Livius Drusus' tribunate in 91, down through the internal and external conflicts of the 80s, and finishing with Sulla's death in 78. There are ample references to ancient sources, and the bibliography is impressively up to date.

As the title reflects, Vervaet's main hypothesis is that this was a period of "revolution" and "visionary reformers"; of "radical" senators proposing progressive laws and "conservatives" opposing them, before the two sides took to fighting in a series of "ideologically driven" civil wars (19).

This is ancient Rome through the lens of modern politics: liberals versus conservatives, Left-wing versus Right-wing. Indeed, Vervaet is so confident in his modernising approach that he draws open comparisons between events ancient and modern, describing, for instance, Livius Drusus' legislation as a progressive "New Deal" akin to Franklin D. Roosevelt's (86 and *passim*) and the Italian separatists as a "civil rights movement" (237).

Others may not agree. Rome was a backwards-looking society, where tradition and ancestral custom dominated political debates, and where every member of the elite qualified, more or less, as "conservative" in outlook. In this context, it seems questionable whether the concepts used here - revolution, reformers, radicals, ideology - have explanatory power. Vervaet does not ask this question. As a result, his analysis struggles under the weight of anachronism, with major characters cast in two-dimensional clichés such as "Sulla the conservative", "Sulpicius the radical", and "Cinna the *popularis*" (a term our sources never apply to Cinna and his faction). If we want to understand this period, we must judge Rome's political culture on its own terms, not view it as an anachronistic reflection of modern Left-Right politics.

More problematic is the handling of the source material. Vervaet advocates what he calls an "empirical" approach: accepting what the sources say in order to reach "maximum historical authenticity" (21). This would perhaps be fine, if we had the contemporary narratives of this period such as Sulla's autobiography or Sisenna's *Histories*. But these do not survive. Instead, we are left with Imperial narratives, written hundreds

of years after the event and with little understanding of Republican politics.

A critical approach to these sources is required. This is especially the case with Appian of Alexandria (active mid-2nd century CE). We are forced to rely on Appian because his account is the longest to survive. But where we can test his data against other evidence, he comes out poorly. For example, we know from multiple sources that the Social War began before the start of the Varian trials. Yet Appian gets this the wrong way round (*BC* 1.37); in fact, he makes the Varian trials the immediate cause of the Social War, a mistake so startling that it suggests he had only the weakest understanding of this period and of the Social War in particular.

Vervaeke shows few concerns about Appian's reliability. This results in dubious conclusions at major points in the narrative, which, taken together, preclude meaningful analysis. For example, in Chapters 1 and 2, Vervaeke embraces Appian's explanation of why the Social War began: the Italians wanted Roman citizenship; Drusus pledged to deliver this as the centrepiece of his progressive "New Deal"; but Drusus was opposed by "conservatives" and assassinated; therefore, the Italians revolted to achieve citizenship.

There is a strange absence of logic in this account: it makes little sense that the Italians would try to destroy Rome to gain legal equality with Rome. Instead, as other scholars have argued, we must surely view the Social War as a genuine war for independence against Rome, the colonial oppressors of Italy. [1] And no other source supports Appian's chronology of 91. Cicero's *De oratore* , set in September 91, never mentions Italian enfranchisement, while Velleius (2.14.1) states that Drusus turned to the Italians only when the rest of his laws were in danger of being repealed (i.e. in October/November 91). Instead, the bulk of the evidence indicates that, at the start of 91, Drusus' objective was to restore senatorial control over criminal juries after the controversial exile of his uncle, Rutilius Rufus. [2] Therefore, far from being a "visionary reformer", Drusus appears to us as a nobleman with a specific, reactionary agenda: the juries. If he turned to the Italians at all, it was probably only in the late autumn, shortly before his death.

Thus with a source-critical approach, we reach a narrative of 91 that bears little resemblance to Vervaeke's version. Similar examples occur throughout the book. In Chapter 5, for instance, Vervaeke accepts Appian's claim that Sulla passed a series of laws after marching on Rome in 88. Following his modernising approach, Vervaeke views this as an ultra-"conservative" backlash against the "radical" reforms of Sulpicius. But only Appian mentions these laws. This silence is particularly noticeable in Plutarch, who (unlike Appian) was closely following Sulla's autobiography. When we consider how unpopular Sulla was after his march on Rome (a point Vervaeke downplays), it becomes clear that he was in no position to pass sweeping legislation on the constitution of the Republic. Most likely, Sulla's "laws of 88" are either a fabrication or another case of Appian getting confused in the face of events he understood poorly.

In the end, it is hard to recommend this book. Vervaeke says (17) he wanted to write a concise and accessible narrative for a readership of

scholars, students, and informed laypersons. But scholars familiar with the period will be troubled by the uncritical approach to the sources. Students and laypersons will be misled on factual matters and by the anachronistic portrayal of Roman politics. Nor is the work particularly concise or accessible. It seems Vervaeke wants to comment on every historiographical debate he can. As a result, there are frequent digressions that disrupt the narrative, and the footnotes (which are written in a strangely belligerent, unsympathetic tone) often occupy more space than the main text. If concision and accessibility were the objectives, then a stricter editorial hand was needed to remove this extraneous material and curtail the mammoth footnotes.

Regrettably, a decent book-length narrative of this period remains a *desideratum*.

Notes :

[1] See e.g. H. Mouritsen: *Italian Unification. A Study in Ancient and Modern Historiography*, London 1998; M. Pobjoy: 'The first Italia', in E. Herring / K. Lomas (eds.): *The Emergence of State Identities in the First Millennium B.C.*, London 2000, 187-211.

[2] e.g. Cic. *Cluent* . 153-4, *Rab. Post* . 16-17, *Brut* . 115, *De or.* 1.227-31, *Off* . 2.75; Asc. 21 C; Vell. 2.13; Liv. *Per* . 70; Flor. 1.47.9, 2.5; Diod. 37.10.1-3.