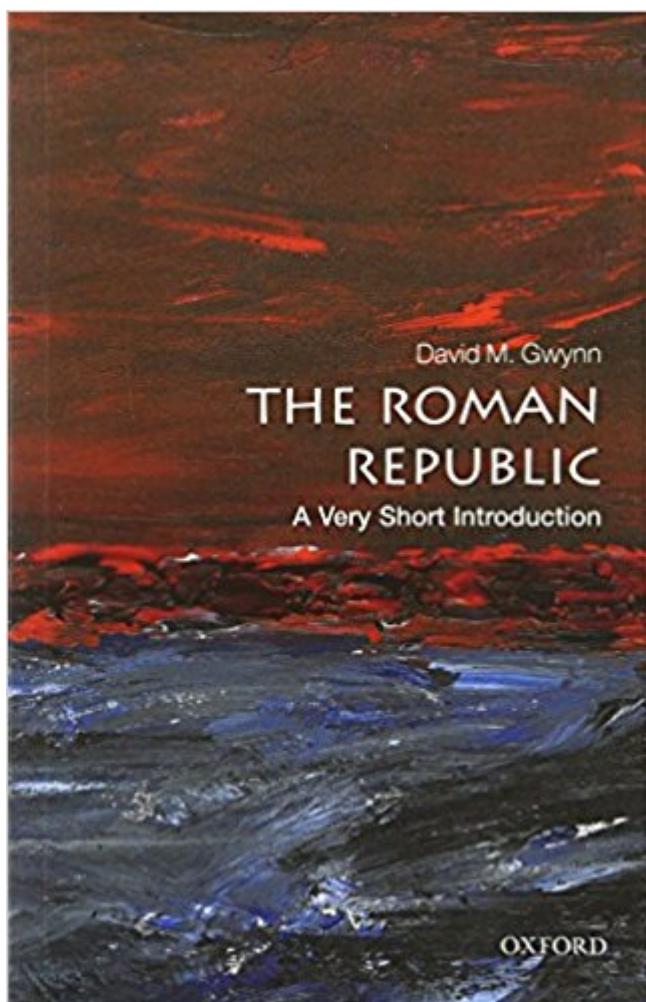


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# The Roman Republic: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions)



## Synopsis

The rise and fall of the Roman Republic occupies a special place in the history of Western civilization. From humble beginnings on the seven hills beside the Tiber, the city of Rome grew to dominate the ancient Mediterranean. Led by her senatorial aristocracy, Republican armies defeated Carthage and the successor kingdoms of Alexander the Great, and brought the surrounding peoples to east and west into the Roman sphere. In this Very Short Introduction, David M. Gwynn provides a fascinating introduction to the history of the Roman Republic, ranging from the origins of Rome and the vivid Roman legends that surround the foundations of the city, to the overthrow of the monarchy in 509 BC, the five hundred years of republican rule, the rise of Julius Caesar and Caesar Augustus, and the establishment of the Principate. Gwynn considers the political structure of the Republic, including its unique constitution, and he highlights literary and material sources, bringing to life the culture and society of Republican Rome. He also reflects on the Roman values and beliefs of the time, in order to shed light on the Republic's dramatic rise and fall. Finally, Gwynn reflects on the remarkable legacy of the Roman Republic, including its modern-day resonance and legacy in literature and in film, where it is often presented as a model, a source of inspiration, but also a warning.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

David Gwynn is Lecturer in Ancient and Late Antique History at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is the author of several books including *The Eusebians: The Polemic of Athanasius of*

Alexandria and the Construction of the "Arian Controversy" (OUP, 2007).

My review is going to be a very short review, commensurate with the brevity of the book...which is well executed, considering the limited page count. What stood out, particularly, was the author's grasp for how large a role the pursuit of gloria among aristocratic rivals played throughout the history of the Republic. From the very beginning, the Republic was to be led by an aristocratic senate, as the stronger element within a mixed constitution. Throughout its history, ambitious individuals challenged the fragile harmony among these ambitious peers, until the last century of its existence, when a deluge of these individuals proved too much for the Republic to bear. Apart from this main theme, the book takes interesting detours into matters of Republican culture...particularly, pertaining to literature and sculpture, emphasizing the Romans' original contributions, such as Satire, as well as skillful adaptations of Greek crafts, such as the more "earthy" portrayal of public figures in busts. The book also includes a helpful "Suggestion for Further Reading," which is up-to-date. The prose are easy, and made for an enjoyable read.

It is a bold endeavor to try and cover the Roman Republic in just over some hundred-odd pages so the author David Gwynn should get some props beforehand. Overall, the author did a good job of condensing what needed to be and omitting things that simply would not fit into such a short title. Only in a few instances was the detail too thin leaving just a skeleton of information on a topic. Once such instance would be in the overview of the different magistrates and how the actual government of Rome actually operated on a day-to-day basis. However, the author does a good job making clear that it was really the senate (until the end of the Republic) that controlled Rome. "The Republic was governed by the Senate and People of Rome, very much in that order." (Page 24) Also, the consolidation of Italy was rather bleak. There were also extremely few instances where the text did not follow easily. In discussing the Roman hegemony over Greece, the author states that Rome kept its word and let Greece remain independent under its protection without garrisons or even tribute. Then a paragraph later he states that the Aetolian League (a league of Greek city-states in north/central Greece) had "grown disenchanted with Roman freedom" (Page 65) just a few years later, enough to have them join Rome's enemy Antiochus, ruler of the Seleucid Empire. No explanation is given over the sudden change of heart. Still, this book has many highlights. The discussion on Roman religion was concise but well done, especially the remarks on Roman religion not being either tolerant or intolerant and the preeminence of orthopraxy over orthodoxy. The author David Gwynn also used an excellent source that I was unfamiliar with, the *Laudatio Turiae*, which is

always a pleasant surprise. He also uses some great stats on Roman wealth and how much one was expected to have for different social classes. This information highlights the wealth disparity of the senatorial elite with most everyone else in the Republic. I also felt that the chapter on culture was well done and demonstrated that the Romans didn't simply copy the Greeks on everything. Probably David Gwynn's best chapter was on the transformation of the Republic into Empire from Sulla to Augustus. This chapter is filled with such lines as "The Roman world began to divide into two camps, for even Rome's empire was not large enough to contain both Pompeius and Caesar." (Page 111) Lastly, there is an interesting ending chapter on how the Roman Republic has been interpreted by others who have come after. One warning to future readers. The author's central point about the actual reason for the Republic's collapse is over the importance of the elites in Rome to garner *dignitas* and *gloria* above all others who have ever come before. This competitive ambition essentially becomes unstable and eventually "warlords" appear to challenge even the Senate. This will be a dead horse that will be beaten often in this book. While I agree with this theory generally, I do feel it is stretched a bit far. He deems Scipo Africanus as the first of these "warlords" to emerge, but Scipio's career and later life did not really act or resemble much of the dictators or triumvirs of the first century. All in all, I felt that this book did a noble job of telling the overall story of the Roman Republic quickly in a condensed fashion. If you are new to the topic or enjoy the Very Short Introduction series, then I would recommend this book. 4 out of 5 stars.

This book is great for an introduction into the Roman Republic. If you are looking for something a little bit more substantial, this book is not for you. This is clear, concise, and lays everything out in a very clear manner.

Outstanding introduction. Hits the high points and is very accessible.

Read this while in Rome. Fantastic for those who (like me) want to be reminded and also learn more than we knew before. I like the design of this series (with flaps on the cover to mark your place). I found this to be easy to put down and pick up where I left off.

Informative, clear and factual, it does not romanticized (much) those times.

A very good book for someone who doesn't know anything about the roman empire.

I always wanted to get a good basic sketch of the origins and life of the Roman Republic. David Gwynn provides a very nice short history with maps, images of items of importance in the Republic's history, a chronology of events and suggestions for further reading for each chapter in the back of the book. Most importantly, the author describes the character of the Roman and the Republic's values that made that culture one of the world's most important and influential civilizations. *Gloria and Dignitas!*

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