

## **BOOK REVIEW**

# **Katharina Volk, The Roman Republic of Letters: Scholarship, Philosophy and Politics in the Age of Cicero and Caesar (Princeton University Press, 2021)**

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# The Roman Republic of Letters: Scholarship, Philosophy and Politics in the Age of Cicero and Caesar

Katharina Volk

Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2021, 400 pages, ISBN:9780691193878(hardback)| 9780691224343 (e-book)

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Ancient Roman history creates a wide interdisciplinary field of study for academics, from politics and archaeology to sociology and art. Interpreting today's world by making inferences from Roman history is the most important factor that encourages the academy to work in this wide field. In *The Roman Republic of Letters: Scholarship, Philosophy and Politics in the Age of Cicero and Caesar*, Katherine Volk examines the Late Roman Republic (63-43 BCE), unlocking details for readers and researchers that were previously overlooked. At the same time, Volk has brought together the subjects of philosophy, religion, politics, rhetoric and grammar in a way that contributes to intellectual history. We can confidently say that this book fills a gap in helping us understand the intellectual and philosophical debates behind the political upheavals of the late Republic and in comparing Roman politics and politics today.

In the introduction, Volk says that the aim of this difficult research is to reveal how senator-scholars Cicero, Caesar, Brutus, Varro, and their friends were, based on their correspondence, using philosophy and discussions to find solutions to their current problems. These names, which we can define as politicians, begin to tell the reader in the first chapter that they have engaged in philosophical discussion to prove the virtuous side of the risky political decisions they often take. "Why are the same men political players and intellectual luminaries? What are the social, political, and larger cultural circumstances that enable this convergence of roles? How do these men's political and intellectual activities relate to one another? And what is the relationship (if any) between the late Republic's cultural flourishing and its concomitant political collapse?" (p. 2)

In Chapter 2 (*Res publica* of Letters), we begin to understand what these men thought, spoke and wrote in these last periods of the Republic. "...my aim here is not to critique the intellectual products of the late Republic but to describe and analyze the period's intellectual practices" (p. 25). Together with a close examination of the intellectual activities of the period, the mood of the Roman elite engaging in politics becomes clear in that they could not prevent

the collapse of the Republic but also what values they acted with. The author, who tries to overcome the disadvantage of the limited written sources from the period to the present by using the written sources of Cicero, allows us to get the impression that the elite were engaged in intellectual activities without being criticized or worried, at least from Cicero's letters, books, and poetry.

Throughout Chapter 3 (Engaged Philosophy), Volk considers "the great Roman love-affair with philosophy" (p. 55) or "art of life (*ars uitae*)" (p. 56) with three test cases: Cato, Cicero and Epicureanism. Volk's notes and analysis of how they integrated philosophy into their political and private lives, which the elite strove to do, made the chapter worth reading. In particular, Volk's telling of the background of Cato's suicide, by extending it to Cato's political and stoic life, adds an unprecedented richness of analysis in the literature. Volk, who finds it right to examine the reflections of Cato's suicide through the works of Cicero, thus helps us to locate the political and philosophical differences between Cato and Cicero. "...Cicero had no taste for carrying on the war in the company of the uncompromising Cato..." (p. 92).

Chapter 4 (*Philosophy after Pharsalus*) deals with the uses of philosophy made by those who sided with Pompey in the Civil War, and Volk examines the process leading up to Caesar's assassination in terms of how this philosophy shaped the experiences and decisions of the elite. During the civil war, the upper class did not see any problem in taking Pompey's side, as they identified themselves with the Republic ('a sense of duty toward the *res publica*'), but when Pompey was defeated, they wanted to wait for clemency from Caesar and return to Italy but were faced with a great travesty. The chapter also details how the post-civil war trauma was overcome and the efforts to make new policies, again through a close reading of Cicero's letters.

In Chapter 5, Volk acts together with upper class Romans like Cicero, Varro, Scipio, and Laelius. The chapter closes with a discussion of how Caesar's book *De analogia* stacks up against these ideas. Volk focuses on the topics that mid-first-century upper class Romans were working on: "others include the origins of the city, genealogies of individual families, civil law, and the histories and practices of disciplines ranging from oratory to augury. While the era also saw its share of traditional political historiography" (p. 183).

Volk's meticulous research reveals that the most important aim of the Roman upper class, which accelerated their studies with the originality and enthusiasm of the Latin, was to complete the development of the *Res publica*. "Why did Caesar write *De Analogia*?" (p. 230). Volk then relates the answer to this question with Caesar's populist political personality. This analysis of Volk may have been somewhat unfair to Caesar. The view of the historian Cremutius Cordus, who lived in the early imperial period, on this approach of Caesar is important. Caesar's response to Cicero's work was with a book, despite the enormous authority he had; according to Cremutius, Caesar's graceful response reflected his human side.<sup>1</sup> The book's analysis of Caesar's every step as a populist act inevitably places the author on the side of Cicero and Cato.

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1 Mario Lentano, "Ötekileri Yenilgiye Uğratan Caesar", Umberto Eco (der.), *Antik Roma*, İstanbul, Alfa, 2021.

*The Roman Republic of Letters* allows us to see clearly the efforts of Roman senator-scholars and elites, especially Cato and Cicero, to prevent one-man rule during the late Republic. With a particular focus on the works of Cicero, Volk blends the unity of political and intellectual leadership alongside Republican diversity and competitiveness. Cicero rightfully appears in the book as the main character, and we have the chance to read about his struggle to save the Republic.

Despite the differences in method in the fight against Caesar's dictatorship between Cicero and Cato, Caesar's soft suppression of the senators and the upper class, especially with Cicero, is analyzed with great mastery by Volk. With Augustus, the Republic was dead. While Volk explains in fine detail the struggle and philosophy of the Republicans, which resulted in the death of Cicero and his 300 senator friends, as well as 2000 cavalymen, readers may find it difficult to find clues about where the Republicans went wrong. Once and for all, reading the last years of the Republic from Volk's pen contains new clues for thinking about the diversity and equipment of policy making that can provide the reader with new starting points.