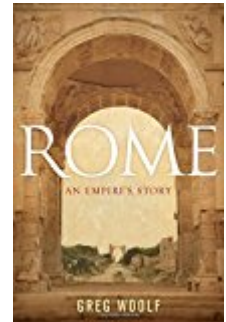


Greg Woolf. *Rome: An Empire's Story*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. xiii + 366 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-977529-3.



Reviewed by Paul Springer

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Greg Woolf, a professor of ancient history at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, has taken on a daunting task. The idea of producing a history of the Roman Empire, particularly one confined to a single volume, might be a simple example of academic hubris, if his goal were to examine in minute detail every event in the empire's history. He notes, "All histories of Rome are histories of empire.... My subject, however, is empire itself" (p. vii). The result is an excellent crash course in Roman history that aims to explain why Rome chose the path of empire, and how significant elements of Roman society contributed to the empire's foundation, formation, propagation, and elimination. Woolf has written about subtopics of the Roman Empire for his entire career, but this is his first attempt to tackle the whole subject at once. He is clearly a gifted educator, as he has an intrinsic ability to provide just the right amount of detail to illustrate a key point, without overwhelming the reader with every bit of minutiae that has been discovered in centuries of scholarship about Rome. In this regard, the work is a

masterpiece that many historians would do well to study from a craft rather than a content perspective. The book seems deliberately intended for classroom instruction, and its organization might very well parallel Woolf's approach to teaching the subject. If not, the style of the book definitely offers a novel way to teach a semester-long course on Rome without having to follow the tried-and-true strictly chronological approach, which often bores the non-history majors to tears.

Woolf employs a back-and-forth methodology to his analysis, offering his work in two-chapter blocks. The first chapter of each pair advances the chronology of the Roman Empire, beginning with a straightforward timeline to help lay readers track the progress of Roman society over time. These chapters follow the traditional chronological approach, and if they were pulled out and published separately, they would create a very brief, effective work on the history of Rome. The second chapter of each block is topical, investigating a prominent aspect of imperial life within the timeframe of the preceding chapter. For example,

chapter 3 traces the rise of the Roman Republic from the foundation of the city in 753 BC to the wars against Pyrrhus of Epirus in 280-275 BC. The following chapter then examines the ecology of the Roman world as a vital factor in the Roman rise to dominance. In particular, the development of Roman agriculture underpinned the entire imperial rise; without Roman farmers providing ample staple crops, the legions would never have conquered the Mediterranean world. At the end of each chapter, Woolf includes a brief overview of the best works in that chapter's subject, leading students to the canon of great Roman works in a clear, forthright manner. The maps could use a bit of improvement--they do an adequate job of showing the imperial domains, but would benefit by labeling the external rivals, on the off chance that readers do not know where to find the Abasids, Epirus, the Numidians, or Pergamum. In most cases, the maps show the Roman perspective, including provincial names, but do not label the foreign lands surrounding the empire.

Most histories of the Roman Empire tend to run for thousands of pages, spread over multiple volumes. Other authors have narrowed their focus to a single, tiny aspect of Rome. Entire works have been devoted to individual co-emperors whose reigns were measured in months. Just the collected biographies of Roman emperors could fill a respectable library, and yet they would appeal to only a very small segment of even the ancient history community. Woolf's book, in contrast, is a straightforward overview with just enough detail to inform and intrigue the lay reader. It is the Rosetta Stone of Roman history--by no means will it single-handedly make a reader into an expert, but it will make them capable of an informed conversation. Woolf knew precisely what he was attempting in this work, and its execution is close to flawless. This book would be a worthy addition to any non-Roman historian's shelf as an introduction to Rome. Its accessibility will make it very appealing to the general public. Its style and craft make it a model for other writers to emulate.

Finally, teachers of survey courses on Western civilization or specialized courses on the Roman world would do well to give this book a close examination for potential adoption.

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