REVISTA DE HISTORIA UNIVERSAL

Nº 25 febrero – julio 2022 | ISSN 0328-3704 | E-ISSN 2683-8869
https://revistas.uncu.edu.ar/ojs3/index.php/revhistuniv
Publicación semestral | Mendoza, Argentina

Recibido: 01/04/2022 | Aceptado: 27/05/2022 | PP. 121-128

Reseña bibliográfica

Gareth C. Sampson (2019), *Rome, Blood & Power. Reform, Murder and Popular Politics in the Late Republic 70-27 BC*. Reino Unido: Sword & Pen. 338 págs. ISBN: 152671017X

Francisco Miguel Ortiz Delgado[1]

orcid.org/0000-0003-1300-1275
Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Cuajimalpa
Cuajimalpa de Morelos. México
fmiguelod@gmail.com

[1] Doctor en Humanidades por la Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Unidad Iztapalapa. Maestro en filosofía de la cultura por la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). Autor de múltiples artículos especializados sobre Historia, política y filosofía publicados en revistas académicas de Argentina, Brasil, Colombia, Chile, España, México y Venezuela. Ha presentado numerosas ponencias académicas en Gran Bretaña, Italia y México. Ganador de Mención Honorífica en los premios a mejores artículos sobre Historiografía, otorgados por el Comité Mexicano de Ciencias Históricas. Profesor de la Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Cuajimalpa.

Profesor Titular de Filosofía Antigua y Medieval por la Universidad de Guanajuato. Profesor Titular de Historia Cultural en la Universidad de Guanajuato.

Cita sugerida: Ortiz Delgado, F.M. (2022). Gareth C. Sampson (2019). *Rome, Blood & Power. Reform, Murder and Popular Politics in the Late Republic 70-27 BC.* Padstow (Reino Unido): Sword & Pen, ISBN: 152671017X, 338 págs. *Revista de Historia Universal*, *25*, 121-128.

There are topics that never cease to be attractive to the general academic and intellectual world, at least in "western culture". Two of those topics that will continue to be studied without the enthusiasm for them diminishing are: 1) the political-military career of Gaius Julius Caesar, and 2) the theme of the fall of the republican regime in ancient Rome.

From the last years of the 20th century every year invariably appear several books or articles that directly or indirectly assess the political activities of Julius Caesar and/or the end of the Roman Republic. One of those texts that studies both questions is the book that concerns us in this review, namely, *Rome, Blood and Power. Reform, Murder and Popular Politics in the Late Republic 70-27 BC* by the British researcher Gareth C. Sampson. The themes of this book, then, are as attractive as they were in the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, or the 19th century, and are as attractive for Great Britain and France as they are for "Westernized" countries like Mexico, Guatemala, or Ecuador.

The reason for the mentioned interest lies, besides other factors, in the fact that the fall of the Roman Republic is the story of how a powerful political entity slowly transitions from a system of division of powers (division not in the modern sense, of course) and from a government sustained by multiple people to a system where a person acquires and exerts multiple powers, where such a person de facto governs in solitude. In other words, the Roman

years from 70 to 27 B.C. encompass the story of the stormy end of a quasi-democrat republic, the most powerful in all of Antiquity, and its transformation, due the deeds of Caesar and others, into an autocracy disguised as republic. Although, of course, this last sentence is (very) subject to debate and, due this debatable aspect it is that the themes of Sampson's book had not ceased to be studied.

Sampson resorts to a quite recent bibliography and, of course, to several primary sources, but he leaves aside well-known and/or "classical" historians of Rome. The author does not study or quote, for example, Edward Gibbon, Theodore Mommsen or Arnaldo Momigliano. This does not imply that Sampson does not recur to historians from before the 20th century; he cites historians that are not so well known, seven from the 19th century and one from the 18th century: E. Belot, F. Garofalo, A. Greenidge, N. Hooke, G. Long, G. Podesta, J. Rubino, and J. Sunden. Although the author does not contradict or refute the positions of specific classic historians, he does refute and contradict consecrated positions of more recent historiography on the Roman Republic. For example, he rejects the much-defended idea that in the six decades before the end of the Republic there were only two Roman civil wars, or a single long civil war, and instead maintains, solidly in my opinion, that there were specifically three civil wars between the year 91 B.C. and the year 27 BC (the First from 91 to 70, the Second from 63 to 62, and the Third from 49 to 27).

The book´s style is not the best; the author falls into multiple repetitions of ideas, writes a tireless repetition of names and in certain passages is about to fall into a morbid and dramatic language (fortunately there are few occasions in which the author finds himself in this tenaciously-avoided-by-the-academics-

danger). However, regardless of the redaction, which in his case was perhaps more an editing problem, the force of his arguments is tremendous; I must confess that before reading this text my vision was heavily sympathetic towards Julius Caesar and his Caesarian faction, today it is not so much anymore.

Sampson reduces the spotlight traditionally given to certain characters such as Pompey the Great, Julius Caesar or Marcus Tullius Cicero, and he gives us a much broader and equilibrated panorama: with an emphasis in many more characters, and with an analysis on more actions and intentions than those carried out by just Pompey, Caesar, or Cicero. Furthermore, Sampson triumphs in arguing that there are no "bad guys": neither Caesar, nor Marcus Antonius, nor Brutus, nor Cassius, nor Cato the Younger, are the villains of the story. In fact, it is made clear to us that the Roman political reality was much more complex during the civil wars than having a scene with just two defined factions facing each other. Much less correct is the oversimplification that many historians have made of identifying a particular "good" political faction in the last days of the Republic (the cesarean or the anti-cesarian depending on personal inclinations).

Even the actions of each historical character are more complex than it is traditionally said, for example, about Cato Sampson demonstrates that this politician was a strict follower of law, so he was a "good" republican "democrat", but in contrast he opposed specific laws that would benefit the poor (p. 107). So, Cato was a republican but also an elitist conservative. Clodius, in other example, was a violent and immoderate politician who, however, passed a law that would benefit everyone in Rome: a law that established the punishment of banishment for those magistrates who without any proper trial condemned people (p. 120).

The chaos, and the dispersion between the fighting political sides, was such in the 1st century BC that during certain periods, according to Sampson's description, there were up to four different political factions facing each other. For example, around the year 40 BC we find the factions of Marcus Antonius, of Marcus Lepidus, of Octavian, and of Sextus Pompey, fighting politically (and military) all against all.

In another laudable characteristic, *Rome, Blood, and Power* can well be praised for emphasizing the legal aspect of Rome, an aspect that is of great importance for the political history of such State, the one that bequeathed its jurisprudence to several regions in the world. Let's see, in recent books devoted to the Roman politics of the 1st century B.C., like *Rubicon* by Tom Holland (2007), *Julius Caesar* by Philip Freeman (2008) or *Cicero. The Life and Times of Rome´s Greatest Politician* by Anthony Everitt (2003), little or nothing is said or explained about the characteristics of the Roman political magistratures and edicts, which are peculiar and unique in all the ancient world. In contrast, Sampson does explain to us such magistratures and edicts: he explains what the *senatus consultum ultimus* is and what functions it has (pp. 12, 120), he explains the tribal assembly (p. 19), the tribunate (pp. 32, 120, 281), the religious powers of the consulate (p. 105), the *imperium* (p. 173), among other issues. These topics are essential to better understand Roman politics in general (not only the ones from the 1st century BC), and recent renowned researchers such as the aforementioned Holland, Freeman, Everitt, and others, have not done so adequately. There is no better way to narrate the political history of a nation or State than by also explaining exactly what types of powers and what types of magistratures the analyzed culture had.

It is necessary to affirm that for those of us who are not sympathetic to the "conservative" or "reactionary" activities of individuals like Sulla, Cicero, Cato, Brutus or Cassius, Sampson´s book makes out doubt or at least rethink our assumptions as the author argues that it would have been better for Rome, as a political unity, that the republicans pro-Senate won the Civil Wars. Sampson establishes that because Caesar, Marcus Antonius, and Octavius Augustus (and previously Sulla or Pompey) were gradually accumulating the powers of multiple magistracies (tribunate, consulate, censorship, etc.) in a single person the Roman expansionism was stopped by preventing the generals from competing with each other to get glory and power for Rome and for themselves.

After the year 27 BC the only military authorized to obtain Triumphs were the relatives of the person that has the power of "all" the magistratures, that is, first Octavius Augustus himself and then his successors (pp. 278-294) the emperors. For Sampson, if the republicans had defeated Caesar/Marcus Antonius, and had defeated anyone else who would want to accumulate a lot of power in his person, like a Pompey the Great or a Lepidus, then the useful free competition of the Roman generals for gaining fame and power would have continued and would have allowed the Roman expansion to endure towards eastern Germania, towards Arabia Felix and/or towards the Parthian Empire (probably dismantling this last empire and allowing the Romans to emulate the exploits of Alexander the Great in the Middle East).

We can oppose, however, the idea that not everything would have been beneficial for the Romans if the republican-radical aristocrats had triumphed in the 1st century BC. Surely the Roman expansion, and the security in the always moving borders, would

have been achieved, but not internal political stability: the bloodshed of six decades of civil wars would surely have continued into another decades, *exhausting the republican cohesion "before its time"*, that is, years before the Roman Empire fragmented in the real time. Perhaps the hypothetical expansionist Roman Republic had fragmented before the real Empire, that is, before the stormy second century AD. Perhaps the Romans would have found it necessary to have a separate Western Republic always successfully expanding into all of Germany and beyond, and to have "another" (Eastern) Republic (with a different head of State) expanding into the Middle East and beyond, and all this happening in the middle of the 1st century AD (that is a century before the first fragmentation of the Roman Empire). In short, Sampson's book gives us more reasons to debate two topics that will never cease to be debated and speculated on, the fall of the Roman Republic and the beneficial/harmful work of Julius Caesar.

It only remains for me to say that the book clarifies the importance of Julius Caesar (even when it is not centered on this politician) for the development of Rome. The actions carried out by Caesar were different from those carried out by other autocrats who had temporarily dominated Rome before him (Marius, Sulla, Pompey Magnus), they were different insofar as they contain traits of a great originality and traces of genius. For example, we are told that Caesar masterfully used religion to acquire political power (exploiting the position of Pontifex Maximus for his purposes; p. 211). In another example, Caesar created new patrician families, thus ennobling hundreds of people (p. 211), an act that had not been done in hundreds of years, and an issue that won him the loyalty of these multitude of new ennobled ones.

In truth, many Caesarian political actions infuriated Republican conservatives and hence the origin of the plot to assassinate Caesar, but what also remains under debate is whether these Caesarian changes of the State and the law would benefit or harm, in the long run, the political entity-unit of Rome.