



The Roman Empire: A Very Short Introduction

Christopher Kelly

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The Roman Empire was a remarkable achievement. It had a population of sixty million people spread across lands encircling the Mediterranean and stretching from northern England to the sun-baked banks of the Euphrates, and from the Rhine to the North African coast. It was, above all else, an empire of force--employing a mixture of violence, suppression, order, and tactical use of power to develop an astonishingly uniform culture.

Here, historian Christopher Kelly covers the history of the Empire from Augustus to Marcus Aurelius, describing the empire's formation, and its political, religious, cultural, and social structures. It looks at the daily lives of the Empire's people: both those in Rome as well as those living in its furthest colonies. Romans used astonishing logistical feats, political savvy, and military oppression to rule their vast empire. This Very Short Introduction examines how they "romanised" the cultures they conquered, imposing their own culture in order to subsume them completely. The book also looks at how the Roman Empire has been considered and depicted in more recent times, from the writings of Edward Gibbon to the Hollywood blockbuster *Gladiator*. It will prove a valuable introduction for readers interested in classical history.

The Roman Empire: A Very Short Introduction Details

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[Name Redacted] says

Far from being a very short introduction, this is actually a very short commentary. The author even opens by saying he sees no need for a very short introduction to the Roman Empire, since others have already undertaken similar efforts, and so simply chose to write out his analyses of various features and trends. In fact it's almost more of a very short series of very, very short commentaries. There may be a time and a place for that, but it's not what i intended to read so i'll go read something else. Frankly i'm more than a little irked that the VSI series bothered to print something so self-consciously contrary to its intended purpose and title - we have a term for that: False Advertising. As such, i'm giving it 1 star. I may one day re-read it and change my mind, based on what it is rather than what it claimed to be, but for now i'm disappointed and more than a little pissed off at the deception.

Victor Sonkin says

This book is a gem. I did not expect a Very Short Introduction on the Roman Empire to tell me very much I didn't already know, so I took up this book mostly out of sheer curiosity, and boy, was I wrong. Kelly managed to write his text with dexterity, brio, in-depth forays into less known facets of the Roman world and facts that were little known to an informed amateur like myself and, I suspect, would be new for many a classicist. Among the things that he touches upon are the intricacies of provincial administration (the Roman Empire was remarkably undergoverned, the degree of independence of its provinces was unimaginable for any modern federal state), life expectancy and health issues of the general population, the ever-present historical dichotomy between the elite narratives (the bulk of the record available to us) and the unprivileged masses and their life; the various lessons derived from the Roman experience by subsequent empires, including the extremely divided attitude of the British (I assume the French, with their 'nos ancêtres les Gaulois' and their Romance language and customs were even more divided). Even on topics which I thought I knew pretty well, such as Mussolini's revamping of the Roman Imperial past and his abuse of history for political and urbanistic purposes, Kelly managed to say something new and surprising for me.

I can understand the disappointment of those who were looking for a very brief *history* of the Roman Empire, but, ma foi, it's better to read Wikipedia for this purpose.

My only personal qualm with the author is his misplaced grammar-Nazism: he avoids split infinitives like the plague, the results sometimes bordering on the incomprehensible, and chooses 'whom' over 'who' where the latter would have obviously been a better option.

Emily says

This was an ok overview of the Roman Empire, possibly useful in a class where an overview of issues about the Roman Empire are important to know (ex: a class on the New Testament or Judaism in the Roman Empire). It was much less of a rush through history than it was a collection of essays on topics in the study of the Roman Empire.

Simon says

If you don't expect a chronological history of the Roman Empire, this book is an excellent introduction to the subject. The author describes how the Romans became the most powerful Empire in history and how their daily lives differed from ours. Most of the book is centered around the centuries 1 BC to 2 AD so it does not really cover the emergence of the Empire or the decline in detail.

Ryan says

"At last, autocratic excess was made democratically available in main street stores. Wearing his 'full-cut rayon' *Quo Vadis* boxer shorts, every American husband now had the inalienable right to 'make like Nero'." From the last chapter of this quick and clever read.

Justin Lynn says

Less of an introduction than a collection of superficial essays.

Tyler says

Short and sweet, gives you the basic narrative.

JD Newick says

Interesting elements of social history but useless as an "Introduction". It only takes the history through to 192AD and never attempts a narrative overview of the era.

Bojan Tunguz says

Roman Empire is one of the most iconic, powerful, and influential empires in history. Its immediate influence on the course of European and Mediterranean history is self evident, but it's the influence that it exerts on the politics and culture to this day that makes it remarkable, and almost unique, in the World history.

This short introduction is in a way a companion to the Roman Republic volume in this OUP series. Unlike that book, this one is decidedly less chronological in its treatment. It focuses more on certain themes that

have been prevalent throughout the course of Roman Empire – the overwhelming and brutal power of the state, the rise of Christianity, the Gladiatorial games, the life in the Roman world, etc. In that regard this is not your typical history book. This approach has certain virtues, and after reading this book I am certainly appreciating certain aspects of the Roman Empire more than I did before. For instance, the sheer scale of the battle violence that the Roman troops engaged in was something entirely new to me. The number of battle deaths was not again “achieved” until the World War I. This is remarkable since, unlike WWI, the deaths in these battles were all hand-to-hand combat with “cold” weapons.

In the end, however, I feel that this “disjointed” approach to the historical narrative leaves the reader without the sense for the “big picture.” Many of the trends that this book covers did not develop irrespective of each other, but were rather intertwined in myriad ways. And this is something that only a chronologically written book can fully account for.

James says

The opening chapter is good, as is the one about Christians being thrown to the lions: "Treating Christians like criminals missed the central point of Christianity. It obscured its fundamental reliance on language, on the scriptures, on the Word" (94). But the other discussions are either too tangential or esoteric in subject matter. This really isn't an introduction to the Roman Empire as much as seven topics that the author finds interesting. Out of the seven, I enjoyed three.

There's no real narrative of how the empire became as such or how it fell (or survived in the east).

By the way, this series from Oxford UP is a great idea but the writing always seems a shade too academic.

Michal Huniewicz says

Great, concise introduction to the Roman Empire, unbiased and critical, gives credit where it's due, where not shying away from complexity. Very interesting note on modern historical methods.

Simon says

Exceptionally well written.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

The Roman Empire: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions #150), Christopher Kelly
The Roman Empire was a remarkable achievement. It had a population of sixty million people spread across lands encircling the Mediterranean and stretching from northern England to the sun-baked banks of the Euphrates, and from the Rhine to the North African coast. It was, above all else, an empire of force--employing a mixture of violence, suppression, order, and tactical use of power to develop an astonishingly

uniform culture.

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Ted says

This Very Short Introduction gives a nice summary of what the Roman Empire entailed. It definitely is not an introductory history of the Empire, though references to Virgil, Caesar, Augustus, Nero and the other famous emperors are scattered throughout the narrative. What Kelly has done instead is to concentrate on the period from roughly 31 BC to AD 192, when the empire was, in his words, "at the peak of its prosperity". I found it somewhat uneven, giving it four stars for the really good information in most of the chapters, while a couple seemed like they could have been left out without much loss.

The book's first three chapters describe interesting and crucial aspects of the empire during this period. In these Kelly explains what it was like for the peoples scattered around the Mediterranean to become conquered by Rome (not so bad after the initial blood-letting, except for Carthage); how the cult of the God-emperors was manifested in the empire; and how the Romans allowed the prosperous and powerful social leaders of each conquered area to continue local governing.

Chapter 4 is called History Wars, and explains Hadrian's machinations (around 130 AD) to reconstitute the history of ancient Greece, as if Athens in particular had always existed as sort of a pre-Roman Rome, having the same values embraced by the Empire hundreds of years later. He contrasts Hadrian's building of Roman temples in the important Greek cities (especially the Olympieion in Athens) with the writings of Plutarch (contemporaneous with Hadrian) and Pausanias (a generation later), both of whom presented their ideas of the true history and values of ancient Athens without any reference to contemporary Roman ideals. This whole story was somewhat interesting, but frankly I didn't understand why it was there - maybe my own shortcoming.

In chapter 5, Christians to the Lions, Kelly uses the early Christian martyrs as the story line for his narrative of the blood-thirsty gladiatorial games which were so much a part of the Empire in these centuries. The topic of the Empire's main leisure-time "sport", in which all strata of society were allowed, even expected, to enjoy the public killing of thousands of animals and human beings, certainly deserves the attention that Kelly gives it. But in framing the story around the Christian victims, who were only a small part of the carnage, and in spending much of the second half of the chapter veering off into a history of the survival and growth of the Church, culminating in the acceptance of the Christian faith by Constantine in 312 AD, Kelly loses his way I think. This is a side story to the Roman Empire, whereas the blood sport in the arena was not.

Chapter 6, Living and Dying, is a very good overview of the demographics, life expectancy, general health, and diet of the people of the Empire. I felt this was a very useful topic.

Finally, chapter 7, Rome Revisited, is sort of an odd look at three views of Rome which have pertained in the modern world - the view by British academics in the early years of the twentieth century that study of the Empire was an important means for learning lessons that could be applied to their own empire; the way in which Mussolini attempted to bring back the glory of Rome as a basis for fascist Italy; and finally the view of Rome that we have received from Hollywood for the last 60 years or so. Like chapter 4, although interesting, this kind of seemed like filler.

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Next library review: D.H. Lawrence and Italy

David Roberts says

The book I read to research this post was The Roman Empire A Very Short Introduction by Christopher Kelly which is a very good book which I bought from kindle. There are around 2-300 titles in this series of books and they are intended as an introduction to the subjects and I think this particular book does a more than adequate job. The Roman Empire at its peak was about 20 times the size of Britain contained 60 million subjects and completely encircled the Mediterranean which they regarded almost as a private lake. When Rome first began to grow it was via a series of treaties with nearby cities. One thing that made the Roman Army was most free men served in it at sometime and normally they were conscripted from 17 for 7 years and this ensured they had a huge amount of man power and a well trained army. Bigger nations normally didn't have anything like their manpower at their disposal. When there were rebellions they were put down in a ruthless manner that was unmatched until Spain conquered South America. One rebellion in Gaul or what is now France resulted in 1 milion deaths and another million being enslaved. Generally countries in the Empire were governed at a local level with a minimum of interference from the Emperor as long as they paid their taxes. One thing worth pointing out is although christians faced terrible fates for much of its history they were given the opportunity to renounce their faith and no further action would be taken if they did. Of course eventually the Roman Empire would turn christian. This book also looks at some of the ancient texts written at that time and what they tell us about Roman life. It also looks at how the Roman Empire was interpreted by people in the British Empire & Mussolini's Italy when at their peak. I did really enjoy reading this book.
