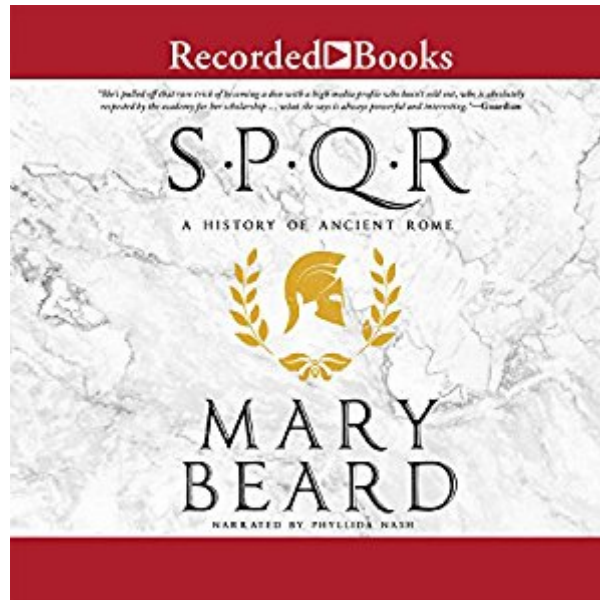




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# SPQR: A History Of Ancient Rome



## Synopsis

A sweeping, revisionist history of the Roman Empire from one of our foremost classicists. Ancient Rome was an imposing city even by modern standards, a sprawling imperial metropolis of more than a million inhabitants, a "mixture of luxury and filth, liberty and exploitation, civic pride and murderous civil war" that served as the seat of power for an empire that spanned from Spain to Syria. Yet how did all this emerge from what was once an insignificant village in central Italy? In *SPQR*, world-renowned classicist Mary Beard narrates the unprecedented rise of a civilization that even 2,000 years later still shapes many of our most fundamental assumptions about power, citizenship, responsibility, political violence, empire, luxury, and beauty. From the foundational myth of Romulus and Remus to 212 CE, nearly a thousand years later, when the emperor Caracalla gave Roman citizenship to every free inhabitant of the empire, *SPQR* (the abbreviation of "The Senate and People of Rome") not just examines how we think of ancient Rome but challenges the comfortable historical perspectives that have existed for centuries by exploring how the Romans thought of themselves: how they challenged the idea of imperial rule, how they responded to terrorism and revolution, and how they invented a new idea of citizenship and nation. Opening the audiobook in 63 BCE with the famous clash between the populist aristocrat Catiline and Cicero, the renowned politician and orator, Beard animates this "terrorist conspiracy", which was aimed at the very heart of the republic, demonstrating how this singular event would presage the struggle between democracy and autocracy that would come to define much of Rome's subsequent history. Illustrating how a classical democracy yielded to a self-confident and self-critical empire, *SPQR* reintroduces us, though in a wholly different way, to famous and familiar characters.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Posted a couple of minutes before on .co.uk This book from Professor Mary Beard is in many respects a masterpiece, but it is also a somewhat original one because it covers the history of Rome, but only its first millennium. The period starts with its foundation, traditionally set at 753 BC, and it stops around to 212 AD, when the Emperor most well-known as Caracalla made all free inhabitants of the Roman Empire into Roman citizens, therefore changing what it meant to be "Roman" and making "more than 30 million provincials into Romans overnight", to quote the author. The event was indeed momentous, as rightly emphasised by the author, but this was largely because of its far-reaching consequences, and these may only have appeared overtime. It can seem odd to publish a book on the history of Rome or on the Roman Empire and stop in AD 212, knowing, as we do, that the Roman Empire continued for over two and a half centuries for its Western part, and at least a further century and a half in the East. This is where the book's title, its meaning, and the author's intentions are important to understand. SPQR is the acronym of the Senate and the People of Rome. The meaning refers to a period where the Senate and the People exercised supreme power in the city of Rome, which was a city-state to begin with, then the capital city of Italy, and the capital of an Empire. It also refers to a period where they appeared to exercise such power, as was the case after the so-called "Roman Revolution" from Augustus onwards, during what used to be called the period of the Principate. This is the period where the Emperor styled himself as the "First among equals" or the Princeps - the First in the Senate, and was careful, at least initially, to preserve the appearances of the Republic and of its institutions. However, this book is really about Roman identity and, more precisely, what it meant to be a Roman citizen, from the foundation of the little city on the Tiber to the million large city that ruled over an Empire centred on the Mediterranean that the Romans arrogantly "but aptly" - called "Mare Nostrum" ("Our Sea"). It is not about what it meant to be a subject of the Roman Empire, or of the Christian Roman Empire, with multiple imperial capitals and Rome being, at best, only one of them. Here we get to the (relatively recent) divide between "Classics" and the Greco-Roman city-state model, as opposed to "Late Antiquity" which covers the Late Roman Empire up to the Arab conquests and no longer up to AD 476 only, and which is underpinned by the Greco-Asian concept of imperial power and Emperors. The reader is also "treated", somewhat amusingly, to the "politically correct" and faintly ridiculous and hypocritical BCE and CE (Before Common Era and Common Era) that have become fashionable and which refer to exactly the same dates as BC (before Christ) and AD (Anno Domini "Year of the Lord"), except that they

attempt to hide the Christian origin of the supposedly "global" and "universal" dating system. Since this book is about the formation and the expansion of Roman identity and Roman citizenship, Mary Beard starts by examining, explaining and debunking Rome's founding myths, most of which seem to have been elaborated between the first century BC and the first century AD. She also analyses more recent Roman founding myths, such as the so-called decisive battle of Actium, and the propaganda of Augustus. Also included is an analysis of what the Roman regimes and societies really were like "the so-called Republic started as an oligarchy and if Roman Senators cum politicians chose, at times, to become "populares", as Caesar did for instance, it was more about power and self-interest than about genuine interest for the poor. To help with this, the author makes use of recent archaeological findings and excavations in Rome itself, and all of what used to be called (somewhat disparagingly) the other "auxiliary disciplines" such as numismatics (studying old coins) and epigraphy (studying inscriptions). To conclude, this is a remarkable book written in a very accessible style but nevertheless with few anachronisms and not attempt to "dumb down", as books targeted towards the so-called "general reader" and written by academic specialists sometimes tend to do. It is also a book that contains numerous and carefully chosen illustrations which are intended to elicit the reader's curiosity and interest, such as the fake representation of Cicero's famous appearance in front of the Senate during which he confounded Catiline. Also included are five excellent maps of Rome and its surroundings, including its Empire. Finally, there are no notes but a rather copious section for "further reading" with just about all of the key references included and commented upon for each of the book's chapters. There would in fact be much more to mention about this very rich book. By this point, however, I believe that anyone reading this review will have understood how valuable I found it to be and how much I recommend it. Easily worth five stars, and I would have given it more had this been possible.

I probably can't add much to the other reviews, but did want to contribute a five-star rating for this excellent book. I liked several things about this book: a) the author does a good job of challenging assumptions about what we "know" about Rome, usually pointing to a lack of evidence (or at least unbiased evidence) for this position or that (eg, how bad were Caligula, Nero, et al in fact?). b) I found the chapters about the formation and early years of Rome particularly interesting. c) the author makes several interesting points about how many Roman expressions and/or attitudes remain with us today. While not intended as criticism, the following comments might be helpful to other potential

readers when deciding whether this book is for them:1) As mentioned elsewhere, the book ends about 200 AD, well before the end of the empire.2) The author relies heavily on letters, etc. by Cicero and Pliny the Younger. While this is not surprising given the relative volume of their correspondence (compared to other known sources), readers who are very familiar with these writers might get less out of the book.3) While the author returns several times to the topic of the unknown history of women, the poor, etc., ultimately I found little of interest on these topics in the book, probably because lack of source materials means there is little to say.4) Generally there is little discussion of military topics. In any event, a very interesting and well-written piece of work about Rome.

Mary Beard in this book opens with Cicero attacking Cataline and ends with the granting of citizenship to all the inhabitants of the Roman Empire and goes back and forth in time from there while discussing the sources of what we know about the Romans. I have five shoeboxes filled with primary source paperbacks that cover the entire swath of Greco Roman history and what Mary Beard has done is taken the texts in those boxes combined with recent archaeological discoveries and in one place at one time written a magna opus on the Romans replacing myth with fact making it all relevant to the present time. SPQR.

If you already know a lot about Rome, I think this book may give you some deeper insights, or different perspectives than are the norm. However, if it is your first foray into the Roman Empire, it might not be as useful.

This is a great incomprehension. It goes in depth to look at the social, financial, and political aspects of ancient Rome. In some parts I feel the author is slightly biased but anytime you ever watch a documentary or read a book you will get a slightly biased point. She does well to not let her own opinion get in there too much. Instead she focuses more on the facts. The book is presented in a way that makes you feel like it's a documentary script. To me I love it. I don't enjoy the extra filler in book. I like to get right to the information. Overall it's a great book for people who love learning. I would highly recommend this book.

Obviously an expert on the time period and provided a lot of information that was interesting and insightful. Found writing style to be awkward and disjointed. Having the timeline handy that is at the end of the book with while you read will be very helpful as otherwise it is very easy to get lost in the

overwhelming list of names of emperors and prominent citizens. Unfortunately, I did not discover that until I finished the book. A downside of reading an electronic version.

The book enlightened me regarding Ancient Rome and its empire. Previously my history came from the "I Claudius" series many years ago. This book told that story and beyond in an entertaining manner. This is NOT a history textbook, it is a very entertaining and informative read.

Recommended.

A discursive recount of the 'events'. Being so, it lacks much enthusiasm and it's not very engrossing. Read Livy's History of Rome or Plutarch's Lives if you'd like a lot more.

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