



The History of Ancient Rome: Book I: The Period Anterior to the Abolition of the Monarchy

Theodor Mommsen

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The Mediterranean Sea with its various branches, penetrating far into the great Continent, forms the largest gulf of the ocean, and, alternately narrowed by islands or projections of the land and expanding to considerable breadth, at once separates and connects the three divisions of the Old World. The shores of this inland sea were in ancient times peopled by various nations belonging in an ethnographical and philological point of view to different races, but constituting in their historical aspect one whole. This historic whole has been usually, but not very appropriately, entitled the history of the ancient world. It is in reality the history of civilization among the Mediterranean nations; and, as it passes before us in its successive stages, it presents four great phases of development—the history of the Coptic or Egyptian stock dwelling on the southern shore, the history of the Aramaean or Syrian nation which occupied the east coast and extended into the interior of Asia as far as the Euphrates and Tigris, and the histories of the twin-peoples, the Hellenes and Italians, who received as their heritage the countries on the European shore. Each of these histories was in its earlier stages connected with other regions and with other cycles of historical evolution; but each soon entered on its own distinctive career. The surrounding nations of alien or even of kindred extraction—the Berbers and Negroes of Africa, the Arabs, Persians, and Indians of Asia, the Celts and Germans of Europe—came into manifold contact with the peoples inhabiting the borders of the Mediterranean, but they neither imparted unto them nor received from them any influences exercising decisive effect on their respective destinies. So far, therefore, as cycles of culture admit of demarcation at all, the cycle which has its culminating points denoted by the names Thebes, Carthage, Athens, and Rome, may be regarded as an unity. The four nations represented by these names, after each of them had attained in a path of its own a peculiar and noble civilization, mingled with one another in the most varied relations of reciprocal intercourse, and skilfully elaborated and richly developed all the elements of human nature. At length their cycle was accomplished. New peoples who hitherto had only laved the territories of the states of the Mediterranean, as waves lave the beach, overflowed both its shores, severed the history of its south coast from that of the north, and transferred the centre of civilization from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic Ocean. The distinction between ancient and modern history, therefore, is no mere accident, nor yet a mere matter of chronological convenience. What is called modern history is in reality the formation of a new cycle of culture, connected in several stages of its development with the perishing or perished civilization of the Mediterranean states, as this was connected with the primitive civilization of the Indo-Germanic stock, but destined, like the earlier cycle, to traverse an orbit of its own. It too is destined to experience in full measure the vicissitudes of national weal and woe, the periods of growth, of maturity, and of age, the blessedness of creative effort in religion, polity, and art, the comfort of enjoying the material and intellectual acquisitions which it has won, perhaps also, some day, the decay of productive power in the satiety of contentment with the goal attained. And yet this goal will only be temporary: the grandest system of civilization has its orbit, and may complete its course but not so the human race, to which, just when it seems to have reached its goal, the old task is ever set anew with a wider range and with a deeper meaning...

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