
The latest addition to the ‘Classical World Series’ published by Bristol Classical Press hits the shelves as the series enters its second decade. Patterson’s contribution joins a lively and varied group of basic introductions to the political, religious, social and cultural history of the Graeco-Roman world. These are aimed at beginner students at both secondary and tertiary levels.

Republican public life is a natural subject for this series, and the new work fills a noticeable gap in the market. At present, beginners are largely reliant on modern general Roman histories for a guide to the nature and structure of Roman politics. Their treatments of the subject are often rather brief and usually concentrate heavily on Rome’s formal constitutional structure. Specialist works currently available in English, such as Develin’s The Practice of Politics at Rome 366-167 BC (Brussels, 1979) or Lintott’s The Constitution of the Roman Republic (Oxford, 1999), remain very much the preserve of advanced students. These works assume a good deal of background knowledge on the part of the reader; not so Patterson (hereafter P), whose comprehensive approach provides beginners with a wide-angle view of Roman politics.

A quick introduction to the subject in general is followed by a brief chapter on the problems involved in finding and interpreting evidence. The main body of the text comprises a further four chapters: ch.3 explains Rome’s republican political structure; ch.4 explores aristocratic competition; ch.5 examines day-to-day politicking through political friendship, client/patron relationships, electioneering and corruption; finally ch.6 deals with the changes brought to the system by the advent of Augustus. P’s style is simple and engaging. He attacks his subject with gusto, but does not allow himself to become bogged down in unnecessary detail. An extensive chapter-by-chapter guide to further reading provides a starting point for those with unanswered questions. The work is no substitute for more complex and detailed academic tomes, but offers excellent preparation for the student wishing to tackle such works.
In this respect, P's work falls into the usual pattern of 'Classical World' publications. Where he differs from, and indeed surpasses, previous efforts is in the progressive nature of his methodological approach. Works in this series have always tended towards the academically conservative. As they are aimed at those with little or no background knowledge of the subject, they generally avoid the complexities and controversies of argument usually associated with cutting-edge research. P strikes a different note by the use of a new methodology, from the very heart of innovative research into Roman political activity. The title of the work, *Political Life in the City of Rome*, is indicative of his approach. From the beginning he sets out to explain public life within its topographical context, examining not only the course of political activity, but also the significance of the setting in which it was conducted. He discusses the physical surroundings of daily politics in order to explain the nature of the various public assemblies and the experiences of participants, great men and urban *plebs* alike. Equally, political competition is partially explored through a study of the adornment of Rome with public buildings and a consideration of the political role of the great man's house.

In taking this approach P is feeding off a strand of research which has been steadily gaining importance over the last decade. While a basic understanding of Rome's topography has always been part of the study of political activity, in recent years this concept has been more thoroughly examined. The new emphasis on topography has been encouraged by the increasing availability of information concerning the republican forum area, especially through the publication of the massive *Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae* (ed. E.M. Steinby, Rome, 1993-), and by the interest of social and economic historians in the precise allocation of space to public, domestic and commercial affairs within Roman cities. Many of those interested in assembly activity, political canvassing and the roles of individual magisterial posts now regard an understanding of the physical context of Roman public life and political activity as a vital tool in their study of these topics. However, to date this view has been confined to specialist academic publications. Patterson is the first to use this approach in a work specifically aimed at beginners; it is an important step.

Nonetheless, in true 'Classical World' tradition, controversy is still avoided where possible. For example, there is an entire chapter on aristocratic competition, yet P never attempts to define 'the aristocracy' as a
body within Roman society (ch.4). Presumably, the arguments that continue to rage over the definition of 'nobilis', not to mention the distinction between the plebeian and the patrician, were thought too complex for the target audience. Where archaeological difficulties are concerned, P's treatment of the *comitium* is typical: he registers Paolo Carafa's argument that the area was triangular, rather than circular as traditionally believed, but does not commit himself to either view and explores the implications of both (14-15).

P's achievement should not be belittled, however. This is a complex area, full of controversy and conflict. It is by no means easy to simplify the contemporary views of such a lively research field into a form suitable for beginners. The evasion of the worst complexities and the even-handed treatment of unavoidable controversy are useful tools in this process. P acquits himself well; his work is a useful introduction to a difficult subject.

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