

David W Fletcher, October 1999

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HISTORY OF EARLY ROME:  
SWAIN'S "ANCIENT ITALY" AND MCKAY'S "RISE OF ROME" COMPARED

In their treatment of the early Roman republic, Joseph Ward Swain<sup>1</sup> and John P. McKay<sup>2</sup> draw out the standard material for the ascendancy of a great world empire. After a quick contrast with the Greeks and a brief geographical overview, both start with the meager but important Etruscan beginnings, although Swain also includes information about the Minoans and the Phoenicians. The Latin conquest of Italy (circa 509 B.C.) follows, with an overview of social and political institutions of the republic. McKay gleans quite a bit from later Roman historians such as Livy, from Roman law, and from archaeology, whereas Swain seems to take a traditional view "from the center" or a political approach. The Struggle of the Orders along with the important battle of Tarentum precedes "The Age of Overseas Conquest" (so labelled by McKay) that includes the Punic Wars (i.e., the typical stuff about Carthage, Hamilcar, and Hannibal) and Roman extension to the Hellenistic East (i.e., the decline of the Seleucids). Here Swain ends his chapter, but McKay continues to sketch Rome's political history through "The Late Republic" or about 130 B.C. until the time of Julius Caesar and the beginning of the Roman monarchy.

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<sup>1</sup>Chapter 10, "Ancient Italy," in *The Harper History of Civilization*, Vol. 1 (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers, 1958), 151-170.

<sup>2</sup>Chapter 5, "The Rise of Rome," in John P. McKay, Bennett D. Hill, and John Buckler, *A History of Western Society*, Vol. 1, *From Antiquity to the Enlightenment* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.; Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995), 133-157. Since I failed to notice which author was responsible for chapter five, I reference McKay, the first listed.

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Both authors nicely elucidate aristocratic and patriarchal aspects of Roman society as well as the important contrast between *patricians* and *plebians*. But Swain includes very little else by way of social history. McKay, however, gives abundant tidbits of information about the life of the people, i.e., the *pomerium* and its significance for the Romulus/Remus legend, the *toga* originating with the Etruscans, also the vault and the arch from the Etruscans, the Roman extension of citizenship to subjugated peoples, details of Roman law, aspects of slavery, customs of the household, the development of the baths and the gymnasia, and some population estimates for the late republic. Especially good is McKay's section on "Old Values and Greek Culture" with the view of Roman life through the eyes of Marcus Cato and Scipio Aemilianus.

Both authors relate a certain "passivity" of Rome in respect to foreign expansion—no "grandiose strategies for world conquest," they "did not initiate action, they simply responded to situations," so McKay; "it was with extreme reluctance that Rome entered upon her great foreign wars," so Swain. But Swain takes this "passivity" to an ironical extreme when he asserts that "Rome's world empire was created by a nation of *isolationists*." Swain also, in his big picture, hints at teleology, since the city itself was "foreordained by nature and geography" and its polyglot of races was the "most successful . . . before the rise of modern America." No such overarching "destiny" is found in McKay, unless the enduring influence of Roman "law, language, and administrative practices" (i.e., heritage to America's Founding Fathers, aped by Napoleon and Mussolini) and Roman pragmatism. Overall, both authors ask the big questions, the why and the how of Rome's rise to world dominance. The path to the great *pax Romana* is

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traced. But the mystery remains. With the “facts” in, neither author fully satisfies. Swain concludes with more “facts” (i.e., Eumenes, Cleopatra, Actium). McKay sums up with a synthesis of geography, Roman organization and administration, and then more “facts.” Neither submit an overarching teleology like, for example, the apostle Paul’s *pleroma tou chronou*, “the fulness of time,” or Augustine’s *The City of God*, which are perhaps beyond the purview of history and into the realm of philosophy and theology.