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**William E. Dunstan, *Ancient Rome*  
London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011**

Reviewed by Adán Stevens-Díaz

This is a large and expansive tome that traces the history of the Roman Empire from the earliest archeological remains in Italy to the Merovingian line of Frankish kings in the ninth century who claimed to replace the Western Roman Empire with a Christian version. The book consists of 41 chapters and the epilogue, which adds a cursory treatment of the Byzantine Empire until the fall of Constantinople to Ottoman Turks in 1453. Historical narrative is interrupted by lengthy analysis of Roman art, culture, literature, architecture and construction (Chapters 9, 14, 17, 22, 23, 28) for each of several periods during the Empire. Explorations of archeological pieces are accompanied by pictures of statuary, buildings and detailed reproductions of floor plans that help visualize the innovations that Dunstan's expert eye has discerned. His fascination with the remains of buildings can be explained by his academic expertise in the archeology of classic antiquity. In fact, this volume is the third produced by Dunstan, following similar books on Egypt and Greece.

As befits an encyclopedic treatise, the narrative is plain and straightforward, without affect or flourish. Even with his unfolding of myriad details, it does not take the reader long to realize that Dunstan has little admiration for Roman culture. He scarcely disguises his conviction that Roman religion, philosophy and literature are inferior to earlier Greek achievements and suggests Roman efforts are imitations of the genius of Ancient Greece. This discipleship to Greece, he notes, actually culminated in the Byzantine Empire which replaced Latin with Greek.

The narrative of nearly a thousand years of history, in 596 pages, has necessarily selected some subjects for curtailed treatment while dwelling on others. For instance, he adopts a quasi-clinical perspective about homosexual behaviors among men, telling readers that Romans admired the ability to assume the male position in all sexual encounters, heterosexual as well as homosexual. Despite this excursus, there is little description of the seamy side of history from the Julian dynasty that is dramatized in the TV series "Rome." While the televised series humanized ruthless political intrigues and indulgent sexual behaviors in dramatic character development, Dunstan is content merely to mention them.

This is not to suggest that Dunstan is without moral perspective. He pictures typical Roman behavior at virtually all levels of society to have been endemically bloodthirsty and murderous, circumstances he finds repellent. I was reminded of an episode in the award-winning TV show, "The Sopranos." In one scene, Tony Soprano and his New Jersey "muscle" are torturing an Orthodox Jewish man who operates an old-age home but who refuses to pay a required kick-back. Despite his pain, the Jew taunts the Mafiosi by

reminding them that his people have suffered through the ages and endured all types of persecution, dating back to Roman times. “Where are the Romans now?” he asks defiantly. Tony Soprano pauses and then answers: “You’re looking at them.”

Dunstan is largely reliant on Latin historians of each period, such as Tacitus and Suetonius. This reliance has the virtue of capturing the attitudes towards events and persons in the full flush of historians from those days. But the liability of his approach is also acknowledged, inasmuch as these writers often had the transparent political agenda of flattering their patrons and besmirching their enemies. Dunstan interprets the bias of each source, selecting for the reader some to be believed and others to be doubted. Unfortunately his opinions are rarely supported with footnotes or references to academic sources. The lack of critical review muddles his opinions. For instance, the narrative of the Emperor Julian (pp. 361-363), known as “the Apostate,” reports he confiscated property given to Christians by his predecessor, Constantine. Dunstan says that Julian intended this action against Christians to unite polytheists and reconvert Christians to Roman religion. Lower on the same page (p. 446), however, he writes: “To fan the discord always raging in the church, he [Julian] recalled those bishops Constantine had banished...thereby encouraging them to continue their divisive quarrels over point of doctrine.” If Julian’s vengeful policy was to foment Christian divisiveness, how can Dunstan cast it as an effort for greater unity?

In another place, the reader is told that Caligula was justifiably assassinated because Dunstan judges the historical sources to be accurate (pp. 286-87). Dunstan bemoans the assassination of Nero (pp. 296-97), however, because that Emperor had “praise for all things Greek,” adding that Nero’s admiration for Greece earned him “significant numbers of admirers.” With these kinds of contradictions, it is hard to separate Dunstan’s predilections from the facts.

Happily, Dunstan frequently provides reliable insights that ring true. For instance, he repeats – although without attribution – Alföldy’s observation that the rise of the empire was linked to the rise of Rome’s equestrian class (pp. 100-03, et passim). Because the senatorial class under the republic could not engage in commerce, its wealth was dependent on land-holding or *latifundia*, he says. The equestrian order, however, used its military vocation to head the armies to enrich itself by creating monopolistic commerce with the conquered countries. Thus Caesar was the most famous, but not the only member of the equestrian class to learn that the spoils of war could buy votes with the Roman populace and easily achieve actual political power greater than that reserved to the Senate.

The other threat to the power of the Senators that Dunstan describes in detail was the redistribution of their lands to compensate Roman soldiers at the end of service. While consuls such as the Gracchi (pp. 136-143) subordinated the interests of the Senators to those of military commanders, the landholders were often powerful enough under the Republic to thwart such reforms. Gaius Gracchus lost power in 122 BCE and died when

faced with mob violence (p. 143). The issue was resolved only later under Octavian who distributed to the soldiers lands that were located outside Italy. This created Roman colonies within conquered territories while preserving the interests of the Senators in Italy.

Dunstan's narrative is content with describing the power base of successive emperors, generally avoiding class analysis. Some emperors are "good" (Chapter 20, pp. 310-329) because they established stable and efficient government. In that environment, literature and art flourished. However, readers will not find in this volume an explanatory dynamic for either the rise or the fall of the Roman Empire. In fact, the only brief treatment of Roman civilizational dynamic is contained in a short endorsement of Gibbon's eighteenth century analysis (pp. 522-24). This endorsement is paired with a dismissal of competing theories. If not for the ability of readers to turn his avalanche of details into patterns of social dynamics, this book might be described as a series of "missed opportunities."

Dunstan's grumpy complaint against analytical theories is another major flaw in this ponderous volume. For instance, the treatment of Emperor Justinian (pp. 526-531) fails to mention the plague that decimated the population, and which might easily be the major reason for Justinian's failure to reunify the eastern and western parts of the Empire in the sixth century. Dunstan relies extensively on dated sources from antiquity and the eighteenth century, without updating his analysis with cogent contemporary insights on, for instance, environmental factors.

Dunstan's volume also wrestles with how to portray Christianity. While his narrative cannot escape description of the impact of the new religion on the Empire, he decides to devote two chapters (29-30) to Jesus, the Apostles and the early church. These chapters fail to display the level of expertise utilized in his treatment of Roman history. In fact, they betray his negativity towards Christianity. He fiercely defends the analysis of Gibbon that sees the rise of Christianity "as a tragedy producing the greatest internal weakness of the Empire" and insists that "the conversion of Rome to Christianity fostered a dangerous pacifism that drained the Empire of military vitality" (p. 522).

I also found his uneven presentation of religious persecutions to reflect bias. There is only one sentence about the brutality against Christians under Nero (p. 293), and no description of martyrdom as carnage for sport under Domitian, Marcus Aurelius and Diocletian. In contrast, descriptions of Christian persecution targeting polytheists carry considerable detail and none too flattering characterizations of Christians (p. 502). Shortchanging the violence done to Christians in the persecutions by polytheists, I think, deprives of context the violence later perpetrated by Christians against their former persecutors. I would also criticize the general lack of original analysis because it renders the book very much like a collection of facts that can be found easily by computer-wise students on the Internet. I found repetitions of the same information, at times with the

same words. This suggests to me that the book was cobbled together from previously composed materials on the specific topics.

These critical observations should be balanced by an appreciation for the achievement of collecting so much material and placing it in ordered fashion in one book. The volume has a valuable chronological chart that enables quick review of events. The index is complete and the bibliography inviting. I view it as a source of data and facts about people, places and artistic production that will be useful to those seeking to go beyond this book's content and enter into civilizational analysis.