

# The New York Review of Books

## The Emperor of Roman History

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***Roman Papers***

by Ronald Syme, edited by E. Badian  
Oxford University Press, two volumes, 862 pp., \$95.00

***Ammianus and the Historia Augusta***

by Ronald Syme  
Oxford University Press

***Emperors and Biography: Studies in the Historia Augusta***

by Ronald Syme  
Oxford University Press

***The Historia Augusta: A Call for Clarity***

by Ronald Syme  
International Publications Service

***History in Ovid***

by Ronald Syme  
Oxford University Press

***The Roman Revolution***

by Ronald Syme  
Oxford University Press

***Sallust***

by Ronald Syme  
University of California Press

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In a large volume that appeared in the late summer of 1939 a thirty-six-year-old Oxford don from New Zealand undertook to reassess the whole tumultuous transition of the Roman state from republic to empire. The focus of the work was Caesar Augustus, whom Mussolini's Italy had lavishly celebrated just two years earlier on the occasion of the two-thousandth anniversary of Augustus's birth. The book bore the title *The Roman Revolution*, and its author described its tone as "pessimistic and truculent." Its aim was

nothing less than the demolition of the Augustan Age which generations of modern scholars had carefully fabricated from a largely favorable ancient tradition. Instead of the Augustus who rescued Rome from anarchy and designed a beneficent Augustan peace, there emerged a cruel and duplicitous politician who deliberately destroyed the Roman republic while announcing that he was restoring it.



Ronald Syme; drawing by David Levine

*The Roman Revolution* was instantly acclaimed as a masterpiece by those who had time to read it in the fearful months that followed its publication. Reviewers in 1940 struggled to make an appropriate comparison. It was the best work on the subject since Eduard Meyer in 1918, the best since Rostovtzeff on the Roman Empire in 1926, one of the most important works on Roman history since Mommsen. The shadow of contemporary events in Europe on the new portrait of Augustus was unmistakable. This was “a book of great and much more than purely academic significance, though its strictly academic virtues are of the highest.”<sup>1</sup> The author, already well known to ancient historians at that time through a series of professional publications that went back to 1928, was Ronald Syme, now Sir Ronald and by general consent the greatest living historian of Rome.

*The Roman Revolution* had to wait a long time for widespread recognition. The Second World War effectively kept the book from entering the mainstream of historical scholarship, and it was not until the early Fifties that Syme’s impact began to be felt. But the impact, when it finally came, was tremendous. Syme’s work shook the sturdy edifice of Roman history which had been erected by Mommsen in the nineteenth century and subsequently decorated by succeeding generations of historians. Mommsen’s labors on the constitutional complexities of Roman government were still the foundation of Roman history as taught at Oxford when Syme was there in the Thirties, and intricate problems such as whether or not Augustus possessed the *imperium consulare* or whether he received a portion of the *tribunicia potestas* before he received the whole thing continued to divert Oxford undergraduates well into the Fifties (and are not altogether forgotten today). It is hard now to imagine just how refreshing, how truly exhilarating it was to open a book that declared, “The Roman constitution was a screen and a sham.”

Syme’s rebellion was the result of years of arduous, time-consuming work in a field of historical research cultivated previously by only a few German scholars. To determine the identity of Augustus’s political adherents, the means by which he won their support, and

the rewards he later provided for them, Syme undertook a detailed analysis of the Roman upper class person by person. At the end of the First World War Friedrich Münzer had shown that patterns of political activity and alliance in republican Rome could be detected by a detailed study of the family histories of the aristocracy. In his *Römische Adelsparteien und Adels-familien* (1920), he exploited with exceptional erudition and subtlety the methods of what is known as prosopography—the cumulative study of the careers of individual people as a means of escaping from a more abstract, impressionistic, and doctrinaire historiography.

From *prosopon*, the Greek word for “character” or “person,” together with *graphein*, the Greek verb “to write,” the modern word prosopography has served for about a century to designate in the field of ancient history what modern historians have called “collective biography.” The family connections and the careers of a substantial number of persons in a given society and period are examined with a view to drawing conclusions about the political system or social structure. Inevitably the characters about whom adequate evidence can be compiled tend to come from the more affluent and important levels of the population, and therefore prosopography is principally useful in studying the political and social patterns of elites.<sup>2</sup>

This is particularly true in Roman history, where archival material such as the modern historian has at his disposal is simply not available. The Roman historian must work with lists of magistrates (generals, consuls, provincial governors, and the like) together with a huge supply of raw data on families and careers from inscriptions, papyri, and coins. To all this documentary evidence must be added the often indigestible testimony of orators, letter-writers, historians, and anecdotalists. An imaginative and resourceful prosopographer will also be able to make telling inferences from passing allusions to important persons in poetry and fiction. But even in the hands of a master, prosopography has never been able to shed much light on the lower classes. Syme once remarked in a lecture for which he had been assigned the title, “The Government and the Governed,” that he preferred to speak only about the governing class and not about the “governed,” whom he characterized as *la gente perduta*, “pale without name or number.”

Prosopography had taken hold in Germany in the late nineteenth century as a result of a large project to provide a register of all known persons of any consequence in the Roman Empire. The project, conducted by Hermann Dessau, was known as the *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*; meanwhile a vast enterprise was launched to provide nothing less than an alphabetical register of the totality of classical scholarship. This undertaking, a monstrous expansion of the old *Paulys Realencyclopädie*, relied heavily upon contributions from Münzer for personalities in the Roman republic. It was from the detailed work on those contributions that Münzer’s study of the Roman nobility in politics took shape. He opened up a wholly new kind of history with his book in 1920, and Syme acknowledged the debt

in the preface to *The Roman Revolution*: “But for his [Münzer’s] work on Republican family-history, this book could hardly have existed.”

After identifying the members of the political factions which served both Pompey and Caesar, Syme traced the subsequent allegiance of these people and their descendants during the bloody rise to power of the young man whom Caesar adopted by testament at his death and made his heir. This was the future Augustus, who inherited at the start not only Caesar’s name but his clients. To these he added others by promises and coercion, and after the defeat of Antony he did not scruple to create a whole new group of patricians by legislation. Meanwhile Augustus revived the flagging fortunes of decayed aristocrats to increase the number of his supporters and to adorn his state with fine old names. Augustus tightened his control by reserving the principal magistracies for the growing band of his clients.

It is unlikely that many historians were reading Münzer at Oxford apart from Syme, certainly not the presiding genius of Roman studies there at the time, Hugh Last, Camden Professor of Ancient History. Last was a strict Mommsenian, a learned man and a legendary teacher, but not renowned for broad sympathies or a flexible mind. He did not care much for Rostovtzeff or his work, and he had little sympathy for what Syme was doing. Yet, as often happens in situations like this, both were greater historians than he by far. Both were breaking new ground. As far as Syme was concerned, the conflict between the old and the new generations could not have been more obvious than when Syme succeeded Last in the Camden Chair and moved into Last’s quarters in Brasenose College. That was, in its way, a revolution in Roman history.

Syme has become a celebrated figure not only in the relatively circumscribed world of ancient historians but in the considerably larger world of modern historians as well. In the Becker lectures delivered a few years ago at Cornell, Bernard Bailyn described Syme as “one of the most creative and influential forces in twentieth-century historiography.” He meant by this that the tools Syme took from Münzer and a few others enabled him to write a new kind of Roman history based on materials hitherto so scattered as to be virtually lost.

*The Roman Revolution* is so widely known that its title has now become shorthand for the transitional period of the late republic and early empire, even though when it was chosen it was a bold and provocative title. For what destroyed the republic and brought Augustus to power was not a revolution against the established order. It was a civil war in which the contenders sought power within the frame of the republican system. To be sure, the system allowed for exceptional dispensations which leaders such as Pompey or Caesar might exploit; but even when the assassins of Caesar feared that he aspired to monarchy (as he perhaps did) his position as dictator was nonetheless constitutional. It was natural

therefore that Augustus, once victorious over Antony in civil war, strove to show that the republic was back again. No revolutionary in America, France, or Russia saw the re-establishment of the old order as his official objective. For Syme, Augustus effected a revolution in the name of restoration.

The great strength of Syme's writing, which makes it so powerful even when it is highly technical, is the sharp vision, with its emphasis on personal ambition, calculation, and clientship. Syme's mastery of the ancient evidence and his prodigious memory enable him to grasp the sweep of Roman history. He moves among details with consummate ease; he never shuffles index cards to illustrate his ideas. It is all in his head, so that he can readily make comparisons and form judgments. The documentation in his publications is amazingly light (especially for classical scholarship). Syme's clarity of utterance is refreshing and, at least for younger generations, irresistible. As he himself has claimed, "The scholarship of the recent age all too often allows the facts to be choked in verbiage or sunk in bibliography" (*Roman Papers II*, p. 540).

Syme's style, as pointed and concise as his scholarly documentation, is now so familiar to historians that others who, under the powerful influence of his work, ape his phrasing are accused of a "Symian" manner. The intensity and brevity of Tacitus undoubtedly lie behind Syme's style, as many have observed; but equally important in my view is the prose of Edward Gibbon, whose ideal of "philosophic history" is one to which Syme is explicitly committed. Gibbon's influence was noted first by Arnaldo Momigliano in a review in 1940.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, the two authors who were major stylistic influences on Syme were no less influential in shaping his vision of the past. Both Tacitus and Gibbon saw the Augustan restoration as a fraud. In the first chapter of *The Roman Revolution* Syme wrote,

The convenient revival of Republican institutions, the assumption of a specious title, the change in the definition of authority, all that made no difference to the source and facts of power. Domination is never the less effective for being veiled. Augustus applied all the arts of tone and nuance with the sure ease of a master.

Gibbon had written in chapter three of the *Decline and Fall*:

Augustus was sensible that mankind is governed by names; nor was he deceived in his expectation that the senate and people would submit to slavery, provided they were respectfully assured that they still enjoyed their ancient freedom.

Gibbon, for his part, was inspired by Tacitus's account of Augustus in the opening pages of the *Annals*, but he made explicit what Tacitus had only hinted at.

It has occasionally been suggested that Roman prosopography, which Syme's work made so fashionable for several decades, was indebted somehow to Sir Lewis Namier's *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, published in 1929. In his introduction to the Italian translation of *The Roman Revolution* Arnaldo Momigliano proposed that Syme had "namierized" (*namierizzato*) the Augustan constitution. But Syme had not yet read Namier when he wrote his book, and his indebtedness to the German prosopographers, especially Münzer, is so palpable as to make any thought of Namier superfluous. On the other hand, other historians, particularly those outside the classical fields, had indeed read Namier and because of that probably found it easier to understand what Syme was doing. The connection with Namier may therefore be helpful in comprehending the reception of Syme's work, even if it had nothing to do with the creation of it.

In that same introduction Momigliano mentioned his difficulty in understanding the relation between Syme's personality and his intellectual development. Syme is reluctant to speak about himself. He has seemed to many observers far more relaxed with foreigners than with the English. He has never shown any interest in cultivating a band of disciples or developing, in the Continental style, a school of research. His enormous influence has been due largely to his writings.

Those of us who studied with Syme cannot forget the informal walks in Christ Church meadow or the glass of white wine taken in his rooms at Brasenose amid the scent of lingering cigar smoke. Instruction took the form of civilized conversation, with an occasional reference to a new inscription, a missed passage in some ancient author, or a firsthand comment on the geography of a corner of the Roman Empire. His sensitivity to literature was then, and remains today, quite phenomenal. It was not only all the Gibbon and the Tacitus he appeared to know by heart. He commanded the works of poets with equal authority—Lucretius, Virgil, Propertius, Ovid. Anyone who has ever heard him recite Swinburne from memory will have realized the sheer sensual pleasure he takes in the sound of words.

Literature lies at the very heart of Syme's approach to history. This is apparent not only from the careful style of his writing but from the subjects of his major books since *The Roman Revolution*. In 1958 he produced a two-volume masterwork on Tacitus, in 1964 his Berkeley lectures on Tacitus's predecessor, Sallust. For both authors Syme explored the impact of the political events of their own time upon their interpretation of the past. For Tacitus in particular he argued that the transition from the reign of Trajan to that of Hadrian was mirrored in the Tacitean version of the accession and early reign of Tiberius. In recent years Syme has written three books on the set of imperial biographies known as the *Historia Augusta*, and Syme's great contribution here has been to approach this work as a literary as well as historical problem.

The biographies in the *Historia Augusta*, covering emperors, aspirants, and usurpers throughout most of the second and third centuries AD, belong to the tradition of titillating, anecdotal reportage begun by Suetonius. For many of the emperors and their reigns there is deplorably little evidence, and historians have accordingly to do what they can with the miserable fare that the *Historia Augusta* provides. The work purports to be a collection of biographies written by six authors under Diocletian and Constantine in the early fourth century, but it was one of the earliest German prosopographers, Hermann Dessau, who first detected deliberate falsification in the course of his examination of the various persons mentioned in the biographies. He also uncovered patent borrowings from works written long after the alleged date at which the *Historia Augusta* was composed.

Syme and a valiant band of dedicated researchers who meet annually at Bonn to ponder the problems of the HA (as it is now conveniently designated) have made a strong case in favor of composition by one author at the end of the fourth century. What gives Syme's work on this intractable topic its special edge is his feeling for literary style and nuance. He has argued that the whole work is a big joke, written by a "rogue scholar" in his spare time for the amusement of other scholars. Although no one can test this hypothesis, Syme himself knows that such mischievous scholarship is really possible; for in the Thirties he himself composed a series of witty Latin commentaries on current affairs for the *Oxford Magazine* under the pseudonym *Pogon*. To those who challenged his audacious hypothesis on the HA Syme replied in an elegant volume clearly inspired by Gibbon's arch and devastating Vindication of the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of the *Decline and Fall*.<sup>4</sup>

In 1979 came *History in Ovid*, the fruit of a lifetime's deep reading in the urbane poetry of the man whom Augustus expelled from Rome to the inhospitable shores of the Black Sea. With this latest work Syme has returned to the preoccupations of *The Roman Revolution*, the politics and personalities of the reign of Augustus. *History in Ovid* opens up in full detail the implications of Augustan literature that had been outlined in 1939 in a brilliant chapter on "The Organization of Opinion." There Syme had drawn from the poetry of Virgil and Horace insights into the people and ideology of the Augustan court. Now from Ovid's many allusions to people and events in the later Augustan age Syme has elicited revelations about military operations in Europe, contemporary morals, and the interaction of literary and political patronage.

Ovid's moral laxity, as it may have appeared to Augustan Rome, turns out on Syme's analysis to be connected with political issues. Augustus's own daughter, Julia, was involved in a sensational adultery scandal in 2 BC that had serious political overtones. But the reader will look in vain for a solution to the old problem of why Ovid was banished. *Carmen et error*, said the poet: a poem and a mistake. If the poem was almost certainly the *Art of Love* (harmless as it seems today), the mistake remains a mystery. *Cur aliquid vidi?*

—“Why did I see something?” What *did* he see? Surely not Augustus’s daughter in the nude, as was once suggested.

**R***oman Papers*, a collection of fifty-nine important articles published by Syme between 1930 and 1970, was originally planned, as the editor, Ernst Badian, notes in his introduction, to celebrate the author’s seventieth birthday in 1973. To a delay in the printing was added a further delay of nearly five years in anticipation of an index. The two volumes of articles have appeared at last without the index, and one may hope that students of Roman history will turn the omission to their advantage by reading the articles through and learning them well, in place of thumbing an index. For these papers constitute in themselves an education in Roman history from one whose own learning came from the solitary study of books and articles, not from proseminars, seminars, and disquisitions on method.

As one reads *Roman Papers*, one is struck not only by the vast range of erudition but also by the unremitting concern to uncover the truth about the past—what happened, when it happened, where it happened, and why it happened. Syme has no time for the “state of the question,” no interest in recording the spectrum of scholarly opinion. He goes directly to the evidence and makes what he can reasonably make of it.

Over and over again from small details of Roman prosopography to grand themes he can correct error and tell us something both new and true. In reviewing the list of known consuls from 30 BC to AD 613, as published by Attilio Degrassi in 1952, Syme contributed rectifications of names and dates to fill up twenty-four pages in *Roman Papers*. For the reprinted version of this essay, he has provided five more pages of supplementary notes in tiny print. Or again he has succeeded in sorting out the evidence for the career of a certain Marcius Turbo in the second century AD in such a way as to prove that the careers of two distinguished persons of the same name had been conflated hitherto. The true story appears in “The Wrong Marcius Turbo.” On a grander level, the new volumes show Syme on the emergence of the Greeks in the aristocracy of Rome, on the significance of bastardy in Roman society, on the impact of archaeology on the understanding of literature in the fourth century AD.

Syme rarely sees fit to defend what he does because he is far too busy doing it. Hence there is little about the nature of history or the claims of the prosopographical method. But the careful reader will occasionally discover revealing remarks. In reviewing Matthias Gelzer’s biography of Julius Caesar Syme praised the book for its lucidity and simplicity: “Remembering that history is narrative, not research, disputation, and the passing of judgments, he lets the facts speak for themselves.” This is an arresting remark from the man who judged Augustus so severely, but from Syme’s perspective it was the facts, when coolly and scrupulously assembled, that spoke and convicted Augustus.

One might have expected some response to the growing criticism of prosopography in Roman history. During the decade of the Sixties there was much discussion of the use or uselessness of the highly specialized inquiries of the prosopographers.<sup>5</sup> The political implications of family connections were challenged, and the concentration on people to the exclusion of ideas and economic forces (not to mention the old constitutional questions) was seen in some quarters as a trivialization of history. A wicked parody of the prosopographical method was in circulation in Oxford in the Sixties. It presented a series of deductions from the consular lists of 79 to 49 BC on the assumption that little else was known, and the deductions were all amusingly wide of the mark. In an important book, *Res publica amissa* (1966), Christian Meier undertook to explain the politics of the late republic from a perspective he called “political anthropology” in order to break free from the constraints of prosopography.

The most eloquent spokesman of the critics was perhaps A.J. Toynbee, whose two-volume work, *Hannibal's Legacy*, took the classical world by surprise in 1965. In this study by a scholar who long ago appeared to have abandoned professional work on ancient history, Toynbee wrote of the prosopographers,

Their work has been invaluable; yet their findings have to be taken cautiously and examined critically. Able and active minds, reduced to a starvation-diet of knowledge, have fallen greedily upon the additional fare that the “prosopographical” approach offers; and they have been under a constant temptation to read more into the evidence of this sort than can truly be found in it.<sup>6</sup>

It was undeniable that some far-fetched and often unreadable work had been produced in the name of prosopographical research. The imitators of Syme were causing embarrassment. Like anything else, prosopography could be done well or badly.

Yet to all the criticism Syme made only a brief reply, where few non-specialists would have seen it—in a highly complex paper on the persons mentioned in Pliny’s letters:

The science (or rather the art) of prosopography has been much in fashion in the recent age, being adduced to reinforce historical studies in the most diverse of periods. Some deprecate. For various reasons. Among them (one surmises), distaste for erudition on a narrow front, to the neglect of broad subjects and the “higher things.” Which may cheerfully be conceded. One uses what one has, and there is work to be done. If there be place for censure, it is better visited upon the ignorant and the incompetent. [*Roman Papers* II, p. 711]

Curiously the 862 pages of *Roman Papers* do not give a comprehensive view of Syme’s published essays. An important reason for this is that a substantial number of his articles have already appeared in other collections: a group of pieces on Tacitus in *Ten Studies in*

*Tacitus* (1970) and a remarkable series of incisive studies on the Balkans in a volume entitled *Danubian Studies* (1971).<sup>7</sup> Many of the papers in *Danubian Studies*, produced in Bucharest and hard to obtain now, show Syme not only as a specialist in the antiquities of the Roman Balkans but in the history of the Roman army and frontier.

It was as a military historian that Syme first acquired his reputation among ancient historians, and his chapters on the Augustan and Flavian frontiers in the *Cambridge Ancient History* rapidly became classic accounts. The earliest of the *Danubian Studies* goes back to 1933, a subtle article in which the Balkan campaigns of Marcus Vinius, consul in 19 BC, were reconstructed from a fragmentary inscription mentioning the river Danube and several Balkan tribes. In the same year Syme published a masterly review of a recent work on the Illyrian wars of Octavian. These pieces were soon followed by detailed research into the acquisition of the Roman provinces of Moesia and Dacia along the Danube. For the first time Syme was able to show the formulation of a considered frontier policy in the Roman administration rather than a succession of haphazard responses to crises.

So dominant was Syme's expertise in the military field that a reviewer of *The Roman Revolution* in 1940 could write, "It is premature to guess how far Mr. Syme will go in this evolution of a moralist historian from a first-class researcher in military history."<sup>8</sup> Syme did not evolve from one kind of historian to another. His prosopographical studies never eclipsed his interest in military history, as his 1970 article, for example, on the conquest of northwest Spain makes clear.

Syme's lifelong interest in the society of the various Roman provinces, well illustrated by many of the studies in *Roman Papers*, led him, in a now celebrated set of lectures, to compare the aristocracies of Roman Spain with those of early New England and Spanish America (*Colonial Elites*, 1958). His focus was the gradual emergence of provincial elites in the society and government of the parent nation—transforming the relation between the two countries.

Syme's dazzling command of geography is due in part to his work on the Roman provinces and frontiers but also to his own travels. When he spoke once at a meeting in Madrid on "Hadrian the Intellectual," a noted French scholar observed in the discussion after the paper:

*Il me semble que personne n'était plus désigné que Sir Ronald pour nous parler du cosmopolitisme d'Hadrien. On vient de très loin, de Nouvelle-Zélande, et l'on devient empereur de l'histoire romaine à Oxford et l'on s'en évade souvent pour des colloques, des congrès, des conférences, des réceptions.*<sup>9</sup>

Now seventy-six years old, the “emperor of Roman history” continues to work with undiminished vigor. The articles in *Roman Papers* proceed no farther than 1970. Since that date Syme has already produced three new books and enough articles to fill up another volume.

## Letters

### Restoration & Revolution June 12, 1980

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- 1 A.F. Giles, *Classical Review* 54 (1940), p. 39. ↵
- 2 For a valuable survey of the nature and achievements of the technique, see Lawrence Stone, “Prosopography,” *Daedalus* 100 (1971), pp. 49-79. Stone includes in his discussion of modern historians “the more statistically minded mass school,” which is not, of course, concerned with elites. Work of this kind is possible in ancient history only with the generous use of analogies from other cultures. ↵
- 3 *Journal of Roman Studies* 30 (1940), p. 75. ↵
- 4 *The Historia Augusta: A Call for Clarity* (Habelt, Bonn, 1971; International Publications Service, New York), replying principally to criticism by A.H.M. Jones and A. Momigliano. ↵
- 5 P.A. Brunt, “‘Amicitia’ in the Late Roman Republic,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 11 (1965), pp. 1-20; Christian Meier, *Res Publica Amissa* (Franz Steiner, 1966); W. Den Boer, “Die prosopographische Methode in der modernen Historiographie der hohen Kaiserzeit,” *Mnemosyne* 22 (1969), pp. 268-290. For a review of the debate, see A.J. Graham, “The limitations of prosopography in Roman imperial history,” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II, 1 (De Gruyter, 1974), pp. 136-157. ↵
- 6 A.J. Toynbee, *Hannibal’s Legacy* I (Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 327. ↵
- 7 The latter volume was published at the instigation of the International Association for the Study of South-East Europe as the inaugural work in its projected series of publications. ↵
- 8 A. Momigliano, *Journal of Roman Studies* 30 (1940), p. 75. ↵
- 9 M. Durry, in *Les empereurs romains d’Espagne*, Colloque à Madrid, 1964 (published by CNRS, Paris, 1965), p. 249. ↵