Social Struggles in Archaic Rome

New Perspectives on the Conflict of the Orders

EXPANDED AND UPDATED EDITION

Edited by Kurt A. Raaflaub
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Editor’s Preface to the Second Edition

When I organized a couple of small colloquia at Brown University in 1981 and prepared the first edition of this volume, which was published in 1986, archaic Roman history was a vastly under-researched field in all countries but Italy. Jacques Heurgon’s *Rome et la Méditerranée occidentale*, published in the Nouvelle Clio series in 1969 and in an English translation as *The Rise of Rome to 264 B.C.* in 1973, and the 1967 volume in the Fondation Hardt’s “Entretiens sur l’antiquité classique” series on *Les Origines de la république romaine* were highlights in an otherwise not very exciting landscape. Since then, a veritable flood of new publications has appeared, illuminating innumerable small and larger issues. This volume’s updated bibliography contains a selection of this new work. Apart from much speculation, inevitable in a badly documented period, many of these publications contain important new insights or suggestions that deserve to be considered seriously. One by one, they add new stones to the mosaic that helps us understand the foundational period of Rome better than we could even in the recent past.

Perhaps even more importantly, four major works now offer a comprehensive synthesis, a broad survey, and a critical analysis, all on the highest level of current scholarship. Two of these are monographs, both authored by scholars who have spent most of their academic life on this subject and have made major contributions before, and both are addressed to specialists and nonspecialists alike: Timothy Cornell’s *The Beginnings of Rome* (1995) and Gary Forsythe’s *A Critical History of Early Rome* (2005). The other two are large collected works; their individual chapters are written by many of the most eminent specialists in the field. Volume VII.2 of the new edition of the venerable *Cambridge Ancient History*, covering Rome’s rise to 220, came out in 1989, the first volume of *Storia di Roma*, focusing on Rome in Italy, in 1988. Add to this a variety of books specifically focusing on early Rome, two very recent *Companion* volumes on the Roman Republic, one edited by Harriet Flower in the Cambridge series,
the other by Robert Morstein-Marx and Nathan Rosenstein under the imprint of Blackwell, conference volumes, and exhibition catalogues and it is clear that by now we no longer lack the tools to inform ourselves broadly and competently on all the questions that anyone interested in Roman history still encounters when turning to Rome’s beginnings and its development in the archaic period.

No less important, the systematic analysis and evaluation of the historians who wrote about early Rome has progressed very substantially in the past few years. This concerns, first of all, Dionysius and Livy, the two authors who provide us with the only extant continuous narratives of large parts of early Roman history. Emilio Gabba, another life-long devotee of early Rome and the historiography on this period, has provided us with an invaluable monograph, resulting from his Sather Lectures at Berkeley, on Dionysius and the History of Archaic Rome (1991). Stephen Oakley is undertaking the monumental task of continuing Ogilvie’s classic commentary on Livy. The first two volumes, containing an important introduction and covering books VI–VIII, have appeared (1997 and 1998); the third is expected soon. Christina Kraus has added a commentary on book VI (1994), emphasizing language and narrative. Gary Forsythe has offered a critical study of Livy’s historical method and judgment (1999). Moreover, the critical interaction between a historian’s contemporary experiences and concerns and his interpretation of the past, and the didactic purpose of writing history, obvious in Thucydides and Polybius, implicit even in Herodotus, and formulated explicitly in Livy’s preface (6–13), has been studied particularly with regard to Livy’s first decade. Second, crucial new work has appeared on Dionysius’ and Livy’s predecessors and sources. Hermann Peter’s still indispensable but cumbersome and long outdated collection of fragments (HRR 1914) has found successors that add translations and brief notes in a French edition and extensive commentary in a German edition. An entirely new edition of the fragments with English translation and commentary is being prepared by a team under the leadership of Timothy Cornell. In addition, the fragments of individual authors like Cassius Hemina, Calpurnius Piso, and Licinius Macer have received editions with commentary. Third, increasing attention too has been paid to later authors. For example, the Origo gentis Romanae (a late antique booklet on the origins of the Roman people) is now available in new editions with German and French translations and commentary, and a valuable commentary on Plutarch’s Life of Romulus has been added to previous ones on other early Roman personalities (Numa, Coriolanus, and Camillius).

Of course, some of the most important new discoveries are archaeological. Ross Holloway’s book on The Archaeology of Early Rome and Latium (1994), Christopher Smith’s chapter on “Early and Archaic Rome” (2000), and Darby Scott’s new chapter in this volume offer welcome surveys. They should be consulted before venturing into the important but often highly speculative and uncritical reconstructions of early Rome’s development written by Andrea Carandini, the excavator of a crucial area on the Palatine (La nascita di Roma [2003]), and Alexandre Grandazzi (The Foundation of Rome [1997]). Carandini’s discoveries, of course, are invaluable: the series of early fortification walls and the sixth-century aristocratic “mansions” on the Palatine, among others, throw important
light on specific aspects of the development of Rome’s earliest settlement and
the wealth of its aristocracy in the period of greatness under the Tarquins. Yet
the first 150 years of the Republic, that is, much of the period covered in this
volume, is still poorly documented in the archaeological record. Scott’s discussion
(in this volume) confirms Cornell’s statement of twenty years ago: “The fifth
century . . . is something of a blank,” and Gary Forsythe observes rightly, “If
modern excavations had not concentrated entirely upon the Palatine and Forum
but had explored other parts of the city, such as the Aventine or Caelian, for
evidence of the earliest signs of human occupation, we might have a very different
view of settlement patterns” for the early period. The same is true particularly
for the Aventine in the fifth century, the “plebeian hill” par excellence, which has
so far been made to yield very few of the secrets hidden in its soil.

From this volume’s perspective, Roman historians can be divided into two
groups: those who think that it is not worth investing a great deal of effort in
investigations of archaic Roman social and political history because the state of
the extant evidence will never permit us to gain a satisfactory level of knowledge,
and those who disagree with them. For my part, I still consider valid what I
wrote on this issue in the first chapter of this volume almost twenty years ago.
It is certainly true that, given the conditions with which we have to work, a solid
understanding of developments in the middle republic is indispensable for any
reasonable appreciation of their prehistory in the early republic, but, as I emphasis-
ized elsewhere, this argument can be turned around with equal justification:
unless we establish and take seriously whatever we can know about early Roman
developments, we might fail to understand fully the related phenomena of the
middle republic.

The debate about the nature and evolution of the “Struggle of the Orders” is
very much alive; if anything, skepticism has increased in recent years. Criticism
of the concept of such a struggle, as it is discussed in this volume, has been
advanced from various directions. One has to do with terminology. As the late
Mario Attilio Levi points out, the notion of “orders” (ordines) is anachronistic
for this early period; it fits much later conditions and is applied to the plebs only
in imperial times. Levi is right, but familiar labels persist even if they evoke
wrong associations. “Struggle of the Orders,” just like its German equivalent,
“Ständekämpfe,” or, in a completely different area, the “Social War” of the early
first century (which derives its name from being fought against the allies, socii,
and has nothing to do with social issues), are outdated terms that should perhaps
be avoided. “Social struggles” would suffice perfectly, but this phrase too, Levi
objects, misleads, because it is based on the assumption that the difference
between patricians and plebeians can be defined in terms of class and social
distinctions such as rich and poor, elite and nonelite. Levi, however, has his own
rather idiosyncratic view, and most of the contributors to this volume remain
convinced that at least a large part of the early republican domestic conflicts arose
from disputes about personal status, property, and social relations.

Cornell shares misgivings about the concept of an early “Conflict of the
Orders,” but his solution differs from Levi’s. In chapter VIII, I propose to distin-
guish various phases in a series of intermittent early republican domestic conflicts.
Cornell aims in a similar direction by emphasizing not only that Rome’s society was constantly changing, but also that “the Conflict of the Orders was the product of historical development.” Scholars from De Sanctis to Momigliano and Richard have contributed to this understanding by focusing either on the evolution of the patricians into an exclusive group, set apart by specific privileges, or on the development of the plebeians as a distinctive class with its own organizational structures. Justified though such approaches are, in Cornell’s view they fail to go far enough. He argues that

there was no ‘Conflict of the Orders’ (properly so called) until the fourth century, when the battle over the Licinio-Sextian Rogations began. Only at this period are we justified in speaking of a struggle between patricians qua patricians and ‘plebeians’ in the sense of other Roman citizens who were not patricians. The polarised situation, in which all Romans belonged to one or other of the two orders, was the result, not the cause, of the Licinio-Sextian Laws. In the fifth century matters were rather different. In particular, plebs were involved in a struggle against oppression by rich landowners, who naturally included the patricians; but this class conflict originally had nothing to do with attempts to break the patrician monopoly of office by persons who were outside the charmed circle of the patriciate. 16

So, again, initially there was no “Conflict of the Orders,” but there were social struggles.

Richard Mitchell’s objection to the concept of a “Conflict of the Orders” is more radical. He has elaborated the thesis presented in chapter VI of the present volume in a book on Patricians and Plebeians: The Origin of the Roman State (1990). Insofar as the “Struggle of the Orders” is understood as a conflict between plebeians and patricians qua social classes, it is a non-event, invented by the annalist historians on the basis of their own second- and first-century experiences. Patricians (and by contrast, plebeians) were defined not in social but in religious and legal terms: patricians were not a social class but holders of religious office. They were priests, and as priests they were the king’s religious and legal advisors. As such they formed the original senate. In other words, whatever social conflicts there were (and Mitchell does not contest that such conflicts may have taken place), the patricians qua patricians did not play a role in them. Reviewers brought up important objections to this thesis, and Mitchell defends his position in a new addendum to chapter VI. 17 Having listed my own doubts about Mitchell’s thesis already in an appendix to chapter VII of this volume’s first edition (now chapter VIII, see pp. 204–6 below), I have nothing to add here.

Scholars reviewing the first edition of this volume have pointed out other shortcomings. 18 We did not pay enough attention to the host of exciting and important archaeological discoveries and to new epigraphical finds. Nor did we take sufficiently into consideration economic or military issues and the interplay between expansion and conquest on one side, domestic conflicts and their resolution on the other. I am painfully aware of these (and other) shortcomings, but this volume was never intended to cover all aspects systematically and in equal detail, and many of the areas missed by critics are integrated by various authors throughout the volume. Darby Scott’s new chapter now contributes an appropriate
focus on archaeology and material culture. In articles and chapters published elsewhere, various scholars have paid close attention to issues of economic development, warfare, and the interaction between domestic and foreign politics. At any rate, the gaps and desiderata are no longer the same as they were in the early 1980s. Those that still exist today would need to be determined after careful examination of the rich scholarship produced in the last two decades, especially the comprehensive individual and collective histories of archaic Rome mentioned at the beginning of this new preface.

Given that two of this volume’s chapters (X and XI) focus on law, it seems surprising that critics of the first edition still found that insufficient attention was paid to law. They argue that laws and institutions provide a more solid foundation for the reconstruction of early republican history than the extant historical accounts. I beg to differ, for two main reasons. One is that traditions about legislation and institutional developments in the early republic are themselves much debated; it suffices to mention controversies about the evolution of the supreme magistracy and about the historicity of a plethora of early laws (some of which are repeated several times). The other reason is that historians of law still tend to work with a static concept of law and to ignore the possibility (which I for one consider very strong) that social and political conventions and distinctions were fixed by law only at a relatively late stage in the republic’s evolution.

Overall, though, the volume was received well and contributed, as we hoped it would, to stimulating discussion on important issues. Several of the authors involved have continued to offer important contributions. Much work remains to be done, especially in the ongoing effort to evaluate the reliability of the extant tradition and its dependence on events and experiences in the authors’ own time. It seems to me equally crucial, in following the lead offered by Jürgen von Ungern-Sternberg in chapter XIII, to pay no less attention to the development of the relevant social and political issues in the third and early second centuries, between the traditionally assumed end of the “Struggle” in 287 and the outbreak of the “Roman Revolution” in 133. To mention only one example, by comprehensively reviewing the evidence on the closely related agrarian and military crises of the period after the Hannibalic War, and by approaching old problems from new angles and different theoretical perspectives, Nathan Rosenstein has recently offered new insights that force us to revise traditional views on the role and impact of war in the middle republic and that are relevant also for earlier periods of republican history.

Despite much progress, the chapters assembled in this volume, focusing as they do on central issues and on questions of approach and methodology, have not lost their significance. In reissuing them, enhanced by an additional chapter and brief addenda that bring them up to date and reflect their authors’ reactions to recent scholarship, I respond not least to the encouragement of many colleagues who regretted the first publisher’s decision not to reprint the volume. I thank them for their support and especially Al Bertrand and his colleagues at Blackwell Publishing for their interest in not just reissuing this volume but doing so in an expanded version, and for their patience in nurturing it to fruition. I also thank Jean-Claude Richard, who volunteered for the important but thankless task of