
A Critical History of Early Rome: From Prehistory to the First Punic War by Gary Forsythe

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As Gary Forsythe points out in the preface to *A Critical History of Early Rome: From Prehistory to the First Punic War*, since the 1990s there has been a ‘major reawakening of interest’ [4] in the study of early Roman history. Indeed, the last decade has witnessed among other works the publication of the first three volumes of Oakley’s magisterial *Commentary on Livy Books VI–X* [1997–2005] sandwiched between Forsythe’s new book and the T. J. Cornell’s *Beginnings of Rome* [1995]. In effect, *A Critical History of Early Rome* is Forsythe’s response to this last work.

Compared to ‘hypercritics’ of the past generations, who assumed that ancient authors invented the bulk of early Roman history, Cornell adopted a relatively trusting attitude toward the ancient literary sources for early Roman history. Cornell argued that the ancient literary tradition contains a good deal of historical material, and that we must differentiate between the kernels of truth that form the narrative framework and the later layers of narrative detail and embellishment that have been superimposed. While Forsythe does not subscribe completely to the hypercritical school, he is far more doubtful about the historicity of the literary tradition. Thus, an overarching theme of *A Critical History of Early Rome* is how few details we know or can know about the early development of the city that would eventually govern one of the most successful empires in the world.

Before continuing, the reviewer should state his own methodological biases. Despite advances in archaeological methods and the accumulation of material culture data, our understanding of early Roman history is still rooted in the interpretation of narrative sources.

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Cornell has shown that while the historian must not approach the sources uncritically, one can plausibly reconstruct events by using these challenging documents. This is not to say that Forsythe's reconstruction of events is implausible; rather, by and large, the analysis and interpretations found in *A Critical History of Early Rome* are well argued and internally consistent. They are, however, based on a fundamentally different starting assumption: that the literary tradition cannot be trusted to provide even a reliable narrative framework, so the historian must be willing to throw out literary evidence and consider other explanations. Once free from the constraints of the narrative sources, Forsythe can propose an interesting and at times revisionist history of early Rome that is internally consistent, and in the absence of outside evidence can neither be proved nor disproved. The reviewer must admit that he finds Cornell's approach more convincing in general, and that Forsythe's systematic mistrust is rather too pessimistic and his more speculative reconstructions unnecessary.

A brief introduction establishes that *A Critical History of Early Rome* will follow, broadly, the organization of the first ten books of Livy's *Ab urbe condita*, our most important narrative source for the period in question. However, chapter 1 relies mostly on archaeological evidence to offer a general overview of Italian prehistory from the spread of agriculture to Italy (*ca* 5000 BC) to the rise of iron metallurgy on the peninsula in the tenth and ninth centuries BC. Here too Forsythe is pessimistic about his sources, emphasizing how archaeological material is preserved haphazardly and may not be representative of the culture that produced it. Moreover, material remains may shed light on some aspects of a culture but simply cannot answer other questions. Despite the gloomy assessment, a few interesting observations emerge, such as the fact that excavations of Neolithic settlements in Apulia have turned up obsidian fragments from Sicily, suggesting long distance trade at even this early date, while the bones of Forsythe, pigs, sheep, and the like imply the domestication of animals. There follows a fascinating discussion of a frozen man found in the Alps in 1991, whose corpse has been dated with Carbon 14 to about 3500–3000 BC. An analysis of the body and of the goods he carried suggests, among other things, trade across the Alps in prehistoric times. First, the working of bronze reached Italy from societies in central Europe and the Aegean, then iron metallurgy reached the peninsula by about 900 BC, and finally 'regional

differences begin to manifest themselves in the archaeological record with the coming of the Iron Age' [26].

Chapter 2 examines the development of Etruscan and, eventually, Latin cultures in archaic Italy, 800–500 BC. Forsythe emphasizes how the Greeks and Phoenicians influenced indigenous Italian peoples. Phoenicians and Greeks traded with and colonized southern Italy, bringing with them important cultural artifacts such as the alphabet and the notion of the city-state (*polis*). In particular, Greeks traded heavily with the Etruscans, who in turn extended their cultural influence as far south as Campania. As for the communities of Latium, archaeological evidence suggests contact with the Greeks, either directly or with Etruscans as intermediaries. However, Forsythe argues against the traditional view that Latin communities were completely dominated by Etruscan culture. Rather, wealthy tombs at Castel di Decima and Praeneste suggest a Latin manifestation of a 'larger aristocratic koine' in Italy [58]. Even though Latium lacked the natural resources found in Etruria, especially deposits of metal ore, by the end of the sixth century, advancements in metallurgy, ceramic production, and agriculture, and the rise of local elites, and socially and politically differentiated populations transformed Latin villages into sophisticated city-states.

Before turning his attention from Latium in general to Rome in particular, Forsythe provides a brief but useful survey of the literary sources for early Roman history [chapter 3]. Considering that *A Critical History of Early Rome* is meant, at least in part, as a response to Cornell's *Beginnings of Rome*, it is not surprising that Forsythe repeatedly stresses the potential weaknesses of the literary sources for early Roman history. For example, Livy and Dionysius are the most important narrative sources; but they wrote centuries after the events they describe, and the annalistic sources they draw upon are often unreliable. Variant versions preserved by Diodorus Siculus do not represent an earlier (and, therefore, more reliable) source tradition. Forsythe expresses scepticism about not only the survival of early legal documents, but also about the ability of authors in late republic who cite them (such as Cicero) to understand the archaic Latin that the documents would have been written in, even if such documents did manage to survive. Forsythe cites both Cicero's and Livy's criticism that family histories were full of exaggeration. Finally, Forsythe assumes that many depictions of events in Roman

history are patterned on Greek stories (or even later events in Roman history). Although Forsythe leaves open the possibility that a kernel of truth might exist in the sources, the withering assessment leaves the reader with the clear impression that he will not find that kernel beneath the heap of fabrications and exaggerations.

Chapter 4 looks at Rome during the Regal Period, traditionally 753–509 BC. Predictably, Forsythe argues that there is likely little of historical value in the stories about Rome's legendary seven kings. Forsythe agrees with Cornell's assertion that Rome was not dominated by the Etruscans during the regal period, but does argue that there must have been cultural interaction between Romans and Etruscans. Forsythe concludes that Rome was a thriving city-state by the sixth century BC, and clearly the most important state in Latium by *ca* 500 BC. The picture of Rome as a city-state that was influenced by Etruscan culture is consistent with Forsythe's general discussion of Latium in chapter 2.

A brief discussion on archaic Roman religion comprises chapter 5. In large part, the chapter is an introductory survey, including a summary of various Roman deities and the calendar of religious festivals; it concludes that Roman religion should be seen as a local variant of the shared Italian cultural *koine* discussed in chapter 2. However, Forsythe does make one important argument that lays the groundwork for subsequent chapters. According to Forsythe, since early priesthoods were few in number and probably restricted to specific aristocratic families, they would have been highly valued offices. Moreover, the access to priesthoods would be critical in the self-definition of the patrician order. This last point is a key component to Forsythe's interpretation of the so-called Struggle of the Orders, the two-century long conflict between the patrician and plebeian classes which according to the literary tradition dominated early Roman history, and which is analyzed in the central portion of *A Critical History of Early Rome*.

Chapter 6 looks at the beginning of the Republic down to the middle of the fifth century BC. According to the literary tradition, the patrician class held a monopoly on high magistracies, especially

the two annually elected consuls¹ who governed Rome after the fall of the monarchy, at least until the Sexto-Licinian Laws in 367 BC opened the consulship to plebeians. However, the consular *fasti*—a list of consuls preserved partly in literary sources and partly in inscriptions from the early imperial period—record a number of plebeian names as consul in the fifth century BC. Scholars who accept the literary tradition assume that these names are mistakes or later fabrications, thus privileging the literary accounts over the consular *fasti*. Forsythe argues that since the consular *fasti* were likely derived from pontifical records, they are probably more trustworthy than the literary accounts. Therefore, Forsythe rejects the tradition that the early consulship was limited to patricians, arguing instead that a patrician monopoly on the consulship emerged only in the late fifth century BC. Picking up on his discussion of priesthoods in chapter 2, Forsythe argues further that the patriciate was probably a hereditary priestly class, so that the patrician class was fundamentally religious not political in nature. Forsythe rejects as a fabrication the so-called First Succession of the Plebs (494 BC), which according to tradition yielded the creation of the office of plebeian tribune whose function was to protect the plebeians from overbearing patricians. Forsythe speculates that the tribunate was originally created merely as a domestic office to complement the foreign/military consuls, and had little to do with the supposed conflict between patricians and plebeians.

There are three serious challenges to this revisionist account of the events traditionally related to the Struggle of the Orders. First, one must account for the ban on marriages between patricians and plebeians. A provision in the Twelve Tables, Rome's first law code (traditionally dated 451–450 BC), reportedly prohibited patrician-plebeian intermarriage. Since a Roman father had the legal authority to forbid his child from marrying someone of whom the father did not approve, there was no need for such a provision unless some patricians and plebeians did intermarry. The marriage ban was repealed by the *Lex Canuleia* (445 BC), and Livy portrays the passing of *Lex Canuleia* as bound up with the plebeian efforts to gain access to the

¹ Forsythe argues that the two consuls were originally called Praetors, and that in 367 BC the office was changed to the Consulship while the title of Praetor was given to a newly created judicial office. The nomenclature is not important for the arguments that follow, so the reviewer will refer to the two magistrates as consuls.

consulship. The ancient tradition makes perfect sense if we assume that wealthy plebeians sought access at least for their descendants to offices that were restricted to the patrician rank, that some patricians were obliging presumably so they could forge alliances with prominent plebeian families, and that some patrician families sought to preserve their political privileges. Second, the rather mysterious office of consular tribune must be explained. In most years between 444 and 367 BC, the Roman state was headed not by two consuls but by a board of consular tribunes, usually numbering between three and six. The consular tribunate was primarily a military office lacking a religious dimension, and it was open to plebeians. The creation of the office can be seen as a compromise wherein plebeians gained access to a high office, but left the consulship restricted to patricians. The fact that the use of consular tribunes became the norm rather than the exception by the beginning of the fourth century BC could reflect the increasing political influence of wealthy plebeians in the years leading up to the Sexto-Licinian Laws (367 BC). Third are the Sexto-Licinian laws themselves, which according to tradition opened the consulship to the plebeian rank, and after which the office of consular tribune disappears (presumably rendered unnecessary now that plebeians could be consul). These challenges are addressed in the following two chapters.

Chapter 7 analyzes Roman society in light of what we know about the Twelve Tables, concluding that ‘a critical examination of the ancient historical tradition surrounding the codification of the Twelve Tables leaves very little worthy of credence’ [233]. The most controversial section of the chapter deals with the ban on patrician-plebeian intermarriage. Forsythe argues that the marriage ban is probably not historical, and that references to a prohibition against patrician-plebeian intermarriage are likely the product of confusion on the part of later historians (such as Livy and Cicero) who misunderstood the exact meaning of the archaic and legalistic Latin in which the Twelve Tables were written. A key piece of Forsythe’s supporting evidence is Cicero’s comment [*De leg.* 2.59] that Sextus Aelius Paetus misunderstood the meaning of a word (*lessum*) in his redaction of the Twelve Tables. The argument thus relies on speculation that the learned jurist Cicero could point out the meaning of difficult archaic terms in the Twelve Tables that others misunderstood but basically misunderstood the nature of the marriage ban, one of the

most notorious provisions of the Twelve Tables. And what about the *Lex Canuleia*, which repealed the marriage ban? Without a prohibition against patrician-plebeian intermarriage in the Twelve Tables, there would have been no need for a law to repeal it, so Forsythe assumes that the *Lex Canuleia* has also been misunderstood by Roman authors.² This is a perfect example of Forsythe's methodological approach. The arguments are internally consistent, and there is no way to disprove them once one adopts such a highly skeptical view of the literary evidence we do possess. Thus, if one finds plausible that the marriage ban was unhistorical, then one will find equally compelling the suggestion that the relationship of the *Lex Canuleia* to the supposed ban is equally confused and should be rejected.

Chapter 8 discusses the period from 444 to 367 BC, and thus deals with the consular tribunes and the Sexto-Licinian Laws. According to Forsythe, the explanation for the introduction of the consular tribunes is to be found not in a political struggle between patricians and plebeians, but in the immediate needs of a growing city-state. As the population of Rome grew, Roman society became more complex; and as Roman expansion brought Rome into more and more difficult wars with neighboring communities, two consuls were simply not enough to deal with the business of the state. This is plausible, though the same needs of the state could have been met by increasing the number of consuls or by creating additional, subordinate offices to relieve the administrative burden on the consuls. One suspects, therefore, that there must have been a political component to the creation of the consular tribunes, which would be explained by the patrician-plebeian dichotomy and a struggle on the part of plebeians to gain access to high office.

As noted above, the fact that the consular tribunate ceased to exist once the Sexto-Licinian Laws opened the consulship to plebeians gives weight to the argument that the consular tribunate represented a political compromise between patricians and plebeians. Forsythe does accept the Sexto-Licinian Laws as basically historical. However,

² Livy and Cicero mention the *Lex Canuleia* but Dionysius does not, and for Forsythe this reflects general confusion about the nature of the prohibition in the Twelve Tables. This strikes the reviewer as too sceptical, and the argument can be turned on its head by emphasizing that two out of three main sources mention the marriage ban.

Forsythe cautions against reading these laws as the outcome of a patrician-plebeian conflict that endured since the early days of the republic. According to Forsythe, the Sexto-Licinian Laws were extremely important in the later development of a ‘plebeian mythology’, which retrojected back to the beginning of the republic a patrician monopoly of the consulship. Since there had been no patrician monopoly on the consulship, at least until the end of the fifth century, the opening of the consulship to plebeians in 367 BC should be seen as reflecting short-term social and political conditions, not as part of a centuries long conflict between Struggle of the Orders. In addition to reinstating the consuls, the Romans also created three new magistrates for 366 BC, one praetor, and two curule aediles. Forsythe sees this as simply a reorganization of the government, with the typical board of six consular tribunes were replaced by five magistrates with differentiated and specialized powers.

Thus, in these central chapters, Forsythe downplays the Struggle of the Orders in his account of Rome’s history from the beginning of the republic through the middle of the fourth century, and he rejects the bulk of narrative found in the ancient literary tradition. This does not mean that the reader is left with only negative conclusions. Forsythe emphasizes Rome as a developing city-state in the process of forming political, legal, and military institutions to respond to increasingly complex demands. For example, tribal assembly, organized by geography rather than property class, was created in the early fifth century since such a legislative body was a more convenient organ of government for a state with a growing population and territory. Forsythe postulates that priests probably monopolized most legal jurisdiction in archaic Rome. The codification of law in the Twelve Tables, therefore, was an important step in state formation that broke this priestly monopoly on legal jurisdiction. Likewise, the political reorganization resulting from the Sexto-Licinian Laws is consistent with the picture of Rome as a developing city-state, as the increased number of specialized civil and military magistrates bespeaks a more complex state structure.

The last two chapters focus on the growth of Roman power in Italy. Chapter 9 covers the years 366–300 BC, dominated by the First and Second Samnite Wars. Chapter 10 discusses the final Roman conquest of Italy from 300 to 264 BC, including the Third Samnite War and the conflict with Pyrrhus, and ending at the outbreak of Rome’s

first war with Carthage. Forsythe does, however, touch on internal political and social developments and he picks up on and develops a number of themes introduced in the previous chapters. First, although Forsythe places the Second Samnite War (326–304 BC) at the edge of Roman history, he continues to view with great scepticism many of the details provided by the literary sources. Forsythe repeatedly denies the historicity of episodes on the grounds that they are modeled on stories from Greek history or on later events in Roman history; or that they are chauvinistic fabrications or exaggerations aimed at glorifying Rome, balancing Roman defeats, or justifying Roman aggressions. Second, Forsythe sees Roman society becoming ‘increasingly secularized’ [320] as the number of priesthoods increased and became open to plebeians, further eroding any special patrician priestly privileges. Third, Roman institutions as a whole continued to be flexible and evolve, allowing the Romans to extend their hegemony over the peninsula. Thus, the Roman political system and mixed plebeian-patrician aristocracy that was oligarchic but not entirely closed encouraged competition and conquest. Likewise, the Roman military system was reformed by the late fourth century. For example, according to Forsythe, the election of 16 military tribunes in 311 BC corresponded to the adoption of the manipular legion, possibly in response to the disaster at Cadium. Finally, the political reorganization of Rome’s allies in 338 BC, the foundation of colonies, and the extension of military roads were important tools of empire and mechanisms for the gradual Romanization of Italy. Looking ahead, Forsythe sees the political and military institutions that Rome developed in the fourth century as paving the way for Rome’s eventual conquest of the Mediterranean.

According to the foreword, *A Critical History of Early Rome* is aimed at the educated general reader, college undergraduates, and graduate students and scholars of classics and ancient history [2]. It is difficult to balance the needs of these different audiences, which is perhaps reflected in the unevenness of the prose. Thus, the advanced reader will certainly find unnecessary or even pedantic such inclusions as the description of T. R. S. Broughton’s *Magistrates of the Roman Republic*, which details among other things how it is divided into two volumes, the first covering the years 509–100 BC and the second covering 99–31 BC [155]. However, the less expert reader may have trouble following some of the denser and quite technical arguments.

And certain readers will undoubtedly grow frustrated with Forsythe's repeated dismissal of literary evidence in favor of his own hypotheses.

This does not mean that *A Critical History of Early Rome* should be avoided. This book presents an engrossing and challenging analysis of early Roman history, and one that anyone seriously interested in the subject should read alongside Cornell's more optimistic *Beginnings of Rome*. Even if he occasionally pushes his case too far, Forsythe reminds the reader that the literary sources for early Roman history must be approached with extreme caution. At the very least, *A Critical History of Early Rome* forces us to consider that Roman historians had a different understanding of historical truth and that they practiced their craft very differently from their modern counterparts.

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