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Review of *The War that made the Roman Empire: Antony, Cleopatra, and Octavian at Actium* by Barry Strauss

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Barry Strauss, *The War that made the Roman Empire: Antony, Cleopatra, and Octavian at Actium*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2022. xii + 350 pp. ISBN 978-1982116675 (hardback). Price \$30.00 USD.

In an expansive and robust book, Barry Strauss elegantly dissects and examines the romance and boys' own stories of the turn of the millennium. He approaches the tough exercise of unravelling many of the stories that have been obscured, forgotten, or downright invented (thank you Mr Shakespeare) and provides the reader with an well researched and entertaining tome. Similar to a Roman Consul marrying an Egyptian Queen, the marriage of entertainment to historical retelling is one fraught with difficulty. Strauss walks through this relationship deftly.

Pay special attention to the title of this book, *The War that made the Roman Empire: Antony, Cleopatra, and Octavian at Actium*. This is not a drab book solely analysing the minutiae of a naval engagement, but instead should be viewed as an exposition of Augustus's life, about how he was able to set himself up for success, and how this resulted in the transformation of a messy Republic into a grand Empire. Actium was important and would fit well in the pantheon of Hollywood productions alongside Waterloo or Dunkirk. However, when viewed alongside the other engagements of this period, such as vengeance at Philippi, the coup at Paraetonnum, the endgame at Alexandria, or even the return of the Parthian eagles in 20BC it is one jigsaw piece in a remarkable series of events. It is also a series of events that could not have happened without Augustus's ally: Marcus Agrippa. Only as this strong duo was the strategic mastermind and their elite military advisor able to surmount unexpected adversities time and again. That this was Augustus and Marcus Agrippa rather than Cleopatra and Mark Anthony is the subject with which Strauss wrestles.

Strauss sets the scene by introducing the main characters and the backdrop they exist in. This provides an excellent window into the humanity and motives that drive Augustus, Mark Antony, Cleopatra, and Marcus Agrippa throughout this remarkable period of history. It also provides a glimpse of the difficulty of the work of a historian, and one Strauss does not ignore. History is famously written by the victor and this period of history is no different. The task of identifying what is sexism, slander or indeed righteous praise is made harder by the romanticism we associate with Augustus as well as the mysticism of Cleopatra. The romanticism surrounding Augustus is of course not an accident, but the intended consequence of his legacy. Strauss points out the obvious pitfalls where source material should be viewed with a bit of seasoning such as Plutarch's description of Antony's depression, as well as underlining very valid and important interpretations of the source material, such as dissecting Agrippa's vital victory over Bogud at Methone. It is this human insight that is so valid in this book.

REVIEWS

Throughout Strauss's history it is clear that the relationships Augustus maintains play a huge part in his success and ability to cement his continuation of Julius Caesar's legacy. This ability for diplomacy and strategic foresight is juxtaposed by Strauss against that of Mark Antony and Cleopatra. In particular Strauss does an excellent job at identifying what drives Cleopatra's motivations. The parallels of what she is attempting to achieve in the continuation of the Ptolemaic line, and recognition of her offspring is clearly similar to what drives Augustus (and indeed that search for legacy is not unique in history). What makes it interesting is the other players in this game. Mark Antony may have been treated cruelly by history, and Strauss identifies how the vaunted reputation and skillset he had in military matters was superior to that of Augustus. However, Strauss also shows Antony's remarkable naivety post-Actium as his position becomes more vulnerable and more untenable. This clear re-evaluation of Antony's competence is contrasted with the expertise demonstrated by the actual main character at Actium and the important events afterwards: Marcus Agrippa. Hindsight and 'what ifs' are lazy tools in history but one naturally wonders what may have been if Mark Antony and Cleopatra had secured his loyalty.

What more could we have asked for from this book? Very little really. This reviewer would have appreciated greater analysis of the remarkable logistical efforts that Augustus seemingly undertook with practised regularity. The criss-crossing of the Mediterranean, from Actium to Samos and back to Italy, the coordination in Egypt during the endgame or congregating the fleets that were key to Actium itself. Perhaps though, this is more deserving of another in depth view of which Strauss would be perfectly placed to explore. Equally, it has to be said Augustus was fortunate in three places – not just in how he was able to manipulate events and who his allies were but also in his longevity. That the founder of the new Empire was able to solidify his image, legacy and divinity meant he was able to achieve what Cleopatra was unable to. He secured his line of succession through compromise and earned loyalty. Cleopatra's decision to flee the Battle of Actium was her best ploy at achieving this. The chain of events that meant we didn't end up with a Ptolemy ruling both Rome and Egypt utilising Caesar's name is perfectly concluded by Strauss.

This excellent book is a fitting tribute to how Augustus, with the key allyship of Agrippa, was able to consign the Egyptian Queen and 'he with whom I fought the war' (*Res Gestae Divi Augusti*) to Shakespeare's stage.

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