

Beard's *SPQR. A History of Ancient Rome* as Background Reading in Classical Latin Courses. A Teaching Proposal

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Introduction. Rationale, scope, and structure

Contextual or background knowledge performs an important function in second language learning and reading comprehension, as a number of theoretical and empirical studies have shown (see, for instance, P. L. Carrell, 1983, 1982).¹ To the extent that Ancient Greek and Latin are verbal codes too, they constitute no exception to the aforementioned principle. Indeed, contextual knowledge is particularly relevant to reading comprehension in Classical Languages, given the time, material, and cultural gap between their original context of use during antiquity, on the one hand, and the context of the contemporary learners of these languages, on the other. Addressing and integrating this type of knowledge into Classical Latin courses is, therefore, expected to aid student comprehension of both original and adapted classical texts.

It goes without saying that one way to accomplish such integration is by means of establishing a set of readings whereby students can autonomously learn about the historical context of the use of the Latin language during antiquity. Beard's *SPQR. A History of Ancient Rome* covers the time period between the Iron Age (matters of Proto-History are addressed too) and the 3rd century CE.

The Cambridge scholar provides an analysis and discussion of primary sources, and re-examines the significance and consequences of the main historical events and processes during such centuries. She starts by focusing on the events of 63 BCE (first chapter), and then proceeds to discuss previous periods in Roman History. In the sixth chapter, Beard resumes the account of events of the already mentioned year, and continues thereon with the rest of the historical account in linear chronological order. With a most engaging narrative style, she implicitly introduces non-specialist readers to some key aspects of the methodological procedures of Source Criticism (*Ad Fontes, Quellenforschung*). The book truly abides by the principle of *docēre et delectāre*.

As far as the distribution of contents is concerned, the volume consists of a map section, a prologue, 12 chapters, an epilogue, timelines, illustrations, index, and endnotes (*further reading*) referring the reader to the primary and secondary sources that have been handled in each chapter. As far as the paratextual elements of the volume are concerned, they interrelate closely with Beard's account and discussion, making an integral part of the reading, one that certainly should not to be overlooked by students.

This teaching proposal is structured into three main sections, all of which consist of a number of suggested guidelines and assignments originally

formulated by the present author and aimed at furthering a *reflection on* and a *discussion of* the book's contents among students. This document was originally elaborated for undergraduates completing *ab initio* and intermediate courses in Classical Latin as part of degree programmes other than Classics (mainly History), but it may be likewise useful for students in other educational settings, such as the pre-university stage and continuous education.

The headings in the first section, entitled *On the chapter contents*, are phrased in a similar way as essay questions. Some of them draw attention to specific historical events, processes, and figures that students are requested to outline and discuss. Factual knowledge, however, is not the sole scope in this proposal, and so other headings concern Beard's argumentations on the interpretative complexities entailed by primary sources. In other words, the focus here is not only on Beard's account of major events and processes in Roman history, but also on her remarks on primary sources and their biases.

Maps evidently place events and processes in their geographical context, and the illustrations that feature archaeological sites, inscriptions, artefacts, and artworks bear substantial interrelation with the discussions and argumentations of the chapters.² These elements thus deserve as much attention as the volume's textual contents, and they are indeed

addressed in the second section, entitled *On the paratextual elements of the volume*.

Recent publications have versed on the role and relevancy of material culture in the instruction in Classical Languages and Ancient History. Liddel (2017) has discussed the use of Greek inscriptions in the study of antiquity at the pre-university stage and has drawn attention to the convenience and opportunity of their inclusion in the specifications of course syllabi. Houghtalin (2018) has discussed the suitability of ceramics and numismatic legends for pronunciation exercises, vocabulary acquisition, practice in grammatical forms, and overall contextual awareness in Ancient Greek and Classical Latin language courses. The suggested treatment of the paratextual elements of Beard's book that we present here is congruent with the aforementioned claims on material culture and Classics teaching.

One further aspect of the volume contemplated here concerns Latin language samples. Each chapter includes Latin terms and phrases designating key concepts of institutions and practices in the realms of politics, social order, and the army in ancient Rome. A list of headings therein can be found in the third and final section of this teaching proposal, entitled *Latin language samples*. It requests students to focus on the morphology and semantics of a selection of such terms and phrases. The present author has grouped them into the following five semantic fields: army; ethics, morality and religion; politics; Roman urbanism; and social institutions and practices. On their part, lecturers and instructors may wish to discuss the semantics of such words in class and prevent their students from attributing to them the same meaning of some derivatives in modern languages (instances like the nouns *libertas* or *virtus*, to name but two examples). Discussing their etymology may contribute to a better understanding of their original sense in their ancient context.

The third section likewise takes into account original passages from Latin sources that Beard most pertinently includes throughout the chapters in order to illustrate key issues that concern Rome's political institutions, the social establishment, and ideological matters. Some of these quotes have continued to be used by politicians and civil groups in

subsequent historical periods, acquiring in each given case new *ad hoc* connotations. Beard most accurately illustrates this by citing public statements that were once made by or about contemporary political leaders, as well as by including one press photograph in which a group of civilians are carrying banners featuring the phrase *Quousque tandem* during a protest in a large European city back in 2012.

This teaching proposal can serve diverse purposes. The initial one was to provide undergraduates with a set of guidelines with which they could self-monitor the reading of the book and ensure to have reflected on and paid a thought to a number of key contents and argumentations. In this latter respect, it could be argued that providing undergraduate students with a document of this nature may initially appear to be condescending towards them, or even inadvisable to the extent that it might hinder their autonomy and academic maturity. It is, nevertheless, worth heeding that undergraduate students may still be taking their first steps in how to approach the reading of titles of secondary literature during the first semesters of a degree programme and, therefore, some form of guidance appears to be justified. Additionally, providing students with some orientation with respect to the recommended secondary literature of a given course may further their analytical and critical reading skills for academic purposes as well as their progression towards greater academic autonomy and maturity. Finally, it is worth noting that the following guidelines may be also used to structure class reading seminars on this particular title, and/or as prompts for written work to be submitted to the lecturer or instructor.

Teaching proposal

On the chapter contents

Prologue. The History of Rome

Discuss what Beard is referring to when she states that current historians address the History of Rome with priorities that are different from those of ancient historians.

Chapter 1. Cicero's Finest Hour

- Explain what the phrase *Conspiracy of Catiline* refers to in the historiography of ancient Rome and indicate the main textual primary sources that document that historical event.
- Discuss the following statement: '63 BCE is a significant year in that crucial century' (Beard, 2016, p. 23).
- Explain what complexities are entailed by the interpretation of events in 63 BCE. When providing an answer, the following statement is to be taken into account: 'Cicero casts Catiline as a desperado with terrible gambling debts, thanks entirely to his moral failings. But the situation cannot have been so simple' (Beard, 2016, p. 45).

Chapter 2. In the Beginning

- Outline the main plot of Rome's foundational legend and name the main primary textual sources that have handed it down in several different versions. You may wish to take into consideration the volume illustrations featuring iconographic motifs related to that legend.
- Discuss the following statement: 'Most "foundations" are retrospective constructions, projecting back into the distant past a microcosm, or imagined primitive version, of the later city' (Beard, 2016, p. 71).

Chapter 3. The Kings of Rome

- Name the most ancient epigraphic Latin document that has been preserved and discuss some of the questions that it poses.
- In the said epigraphic document, the term *rex* might bear political implications. Discuss whether it can be considered a piece of evidence for claiming the existence of an organised monarchy or not and why.
- Discuss the possible biases in Livy's account of the monarchic period. How do Livy's textual account and archaeological evidence differ?

Chapter 4. Rome's Great Leap Forward

- Explain the meaning of the term *virtus* in classical Latin and touch upon its etymology.
- Discuss why the period 500 BCE – 300 BCE was crucial in the history of the city of Rome.
- Discuss what archaeological evidence reveals about the city of Rome during the 5th century CE.
- Refer to the main primary textual sources of the 1st century BCE documenting the *Conflict of the Orders* and discuss their ideological biases.
- Explain the significance of the city of Veii in the process of territorial expansion of Rome.

Chapter 5. A Wider World

- Discuss the relevance of Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus to the history of Ancient Rome.
- State who was, in Beard's words, the first writer who formulated crucial questions and what those questions were.

Chapter 6. New Politics

- Sallust claimed that *virtus* had been replaced by moral corruption. State to what historical period, as well as to what social and political processes this ancient historian was referring.
- Outline the events resulting from the alliance between Pompeii, Julius Caesar and Marcus Licinius Crassus.
- Discuss the events in which the Gracchi were involved.

Chapter 7. From Empire to Emperors

- State the main ancient textual source documenting the period of the mid first century BCE.

- State the consequences of the so-called *Idea of March* in Rome's political history.
- Name major paintings from the Early Modern period onwards that rework that particular historical motif.
- Discuss the following statement: 'Pompey has a good claim to be called the first Roman Emperor' (Beard, 2016, p. 274).
- Discuss whether Brutus and his accolades managed to meet their political goals or not and why.

Chapter 8. The Home Front

- Name one major source documenting the Social History of Rome from the 1st century CE onwards.
- Topics of Social History. Discuss pregnancy, childbirth, and life expectancy among the majority of the population in ancient Rome.
- State what the main source of wealth was for the senatorial elite.
- Discuss what this chapter recounts about slavery in ancient Rome.

Chapter 9. The Transformations of Augustus

- Outline the main characteristics of the Principate of Augustus.
- State the main textual source that documents the period and discuss its most salient bias.
- Outline the main changes in Rome's urbanism under the rule of Augustus.
- Discuss the main means of propaganda during his Principate.

Chapter 10. 14 emperors

- Discuss the reaction of the members of the Senate in the aftermath of the death of Caligula.
- Discuss the challenges posed by ancient sources when it comes to

determining the precise type of government of each one of the 14 emperors.

- Discuss how contemporary historians address those primary sources.
- Discuss the sense conveyed by the following statement: 'But the 14 emperors were also heirs to the problems and tensions that Augustus bequeathed' (Beard, 2016, p. 413). Specify and discuss the *problems* and *tensions* to which Beard is alluding.

Chapter 11. The Haves and Have-Nots

- Indicate what types of information human bones and detritus can provide to the reconstruction of the social history of ancient Rome.
- Discuss the life and work conditions of most part of the population in ancient Rome.
- State the origin of the wealth of emperors.
- Indicate what the terms *otium* and *negotium* designated in ancient Rome.
- Indicate what type of institutions the *collegia* were.
- Discuss the habitative conditions of lower-class social groups.
- Beard asserts that to reconstruct the lives of well-off groups is easier than reconstructing those of other social groups. Explain why.

Chapter 12. Rome Outside Rome

- Discuss what Augustus stated in his testament with respect to Rome's territorial expansion.
- Outline the events of the Masada fortress in 73 CE.
- Discuss whether, in Beard's opinion, the events of Masada (73 CE) and the actions of the leader Boudica can be

considered illustrative of the behaviour of provincials when confronted with Roman rule (or not) and why.

- Summarise and discuss the information contained in this chapter about Christianity during the time period addressed.
- Discuss what the letters of Pliny the Younger reveal about the administration of the Roman provinces during the Imperial period.
- Discuss whether the existence of a centralised government during the time period covered in this chapter can be ascertained or denied and why.

Epilogue. The First Roman Millennium

- Discuss the significance and effects of Caracalla's decree in the history of the Roman Empire.
- Explain what the phrase 'second-century crisis' designates in the historiography of ancient Rome.
- State the hypotheses put forward by Beard as possible underlying causes of Caracalla's decree.

On the paratextual elements of the volume

- *Early Rome and its neighbours.* Select three locations other than the *Urbs* and discuss their significance in the history of ancient Rome.
- *The site of Rome.* Comment on the geographical location and orography of the *Urbs*, as well as on the civil engineering works featured in this map.
- *Roman Italy.* On the basis of this one reading, discuss the process of Romanisation of the Italian Peninsula.
- *The city of Rome in the imperial period.* Select two public works featuring in this map and state when they were built and to what purpose.
- *The Roman World.* Select three locations and state in what period they fell under or established contact with Roman

rule, what significant events took place there, and whether they currently display remains of material culture corresponding to the process of Romanisation.

- Discuss the specific aspects of the Punic Wars evoked by illustrations 25, 29, 32, as well as by the eighth plate (central pages).
- On the basis of this reading, outline the process of Roman conquest and territorial expansion. You may also wish to refer to illustrations 10, 70, 76, and 100, among others.
- Illustration 92 shows the drawing of an epigraphic inscription. Discuss its location and function. Name the grammar case, gender and number of the following underlined nouns:
Neptuno et Minervae templum / Pro salute domus divinae
- A number of plates of this book show paintings by artists Mantegna, Titian, Poussin, A. Kauffmann, Jacques-Louis David, Maccari, and Picasso that depict reworkings of historical motifs of ancient Rome. Comment on such paintings.

On the Latin language samples Terms and phrases

Below is a selection of Latin words and phrases that Beard incorporates into her account and discussions in order to illustrate salient points of the chapters. Explain what each one of them refers to or names. Where deemed appropriate, discuss their etymology. As far as grammatical features are concerned, indicate declension, gender, and number (the number in which they feature here, that is).

- **Army:** *hostis, imperium*
- **Ethics, Morality, and Religion:** *fanum, numen, sacrosanctitas, virtus*
- **Politics:** *candidatus, civilitas, civitas sine suffragio, clementia, contiones, decemviri, equites, gens togata, libertas, mandata, primus inter pares, procurator, publicani, res publica, tribuni plebis, tribunicia potestas*
- **Roman urbanism:** *colles, cubicula, insulae, montes, rostra*

- **Social institutions and practices:** *assidui, cognomen, collegia, conubium, imagines, libertus, negotium, otium, proletarii, salutatio, servus*

Passages from primary sources

The passages below are from ancient Latin sources. Some of them come from prose works (mainly oratory and historiography), whereas others come from poetry works. They are by diverse writers. Provide information about the source title and author. Identify and discuss the historical context in which they were composed as well as the events or processes to which they refer. Where deemed appropriate, discuss their (possible) underlying political and ideological biases or agendas.

- *Carthago delenda est.* This statement is attributed to Cato the Elder, but its authenticity and ultimate ancient source have been disputed (see Little, 1934). Matters of actual authorship and variations notwithstanding, discuss the historical context to which the phrase refers.
- *quo usque tandem abutere, Catilina, patientia nostra?* (Cic. *Cat.* 1.1)
- *arma virumque cano* (Verg. *Aen.* 1.1)
- *imperium sine fine* (Verg. *Aen.* 1.279)
- *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit et artes intulit agresti Latio* (Hor. *Epist.* 2.1. 156–157)
- *humanitas vocabatur, cum pars servitutis esset* (Tac. *Agr.* 21.2)
- *ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant* (Tac. *Agr.* 30.4)
- *urbem Romam a principio reges habuere* (Tac. *Ann.* 1.1)

Recapitulation

Contextual knowledge performs an important function in reading comprehension in a second language, as a number of theoretical and empirical studies have shown. This type of knowledge is all the more relevant to reading comprehension in Classical Languages, given the time, cultural, and

material breach between their original contexts of use during antiquity, on the one hand, and the context of the contemporary students, on the other. Integrating topics of ancient history into Classical Latin language course syllabi is thus most likely to result in enhanced comprehension of the Latin texts on the part of students. The previous sections have presented one suggested way to accomplish such integration by means of a set of assignments on the reading of Beard's book *SPQR. A History of Ancient Rome*, that addresses the period between the Iron Age in the Italian Peninsula and the year 212 CE. The Cambridge scholar combines a most engaging style with academic rigour, providing her very own account of the period on grounds of a sharp analysis of a large variety of sources. This title thus provides students of Classical Latin with a sound introduction to the original context of use of this language. Furthermore, it (implicitly) introduces undergraduates to the historiographical research techniques that scholars apply to the study of ancient Rome. In the latter respect, this reading also stimulates the development of critical and analytical skills.

As a final remark, it is important to note that we only hope not to have dishonoured

Beard's book itself with this initiative. Our intention has been in fact the opposite one.

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¹Contextual or background knowledge is also termed *content schemata* in the literature of the field of Applied Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition. An in-depth discussion of the role of *content schemata* in second language learning and reading comprehension lies beyond the scope and purpose of this teaching proposal. For some detailed accounts of the subject, the reader is referred to the seminal works of reference cited in the introductory section.

²It is worth drawing attention to the plate featuring *The Peutinger Table*, a map of the Roman Empire dating back to the 13th century, although possibly based on a former one that had been supposedly exhibited in Rome during the 1st century BCE. It is most adequate to illustrate the development of cartography throughout time.