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Reviews

Ferdinand Addis, *Rome: Eternal City*, UK, Head of Zeus, 2018, 632 p., ISBN: 9781781853047

Omnes viae Romam ducunt. All roads lead to Rome. I learned this when I was a child. And, to be honest, I always wanted to see if this is true. And it became so when I first visited Rome. Ever since, the imperial city has a special place in my heart.

From my latest visit (January 2020) I came back with a wonderful book, *Rome: Eternal City*, by Ferdinand Addis, “a superb biography of the world’s greatest city,” as Patrick Kidd has written for *The Times* on September 1, 2018.

The author, Ferdinand Addis, who studied Classics at Oxford, before becoming a journalist, is in a personal search for Rome as *caput mundi*. Thus, in this marvelous book, he examines the mythos of the “eternal city,” and follows the most glorious moments of Rome, from the wolf children to gladiators, and beyond. More than that, Addis casts a keen eye over the big figures of history, but also over its crowds, and presents the life of the eternal city from a new and different perspective.

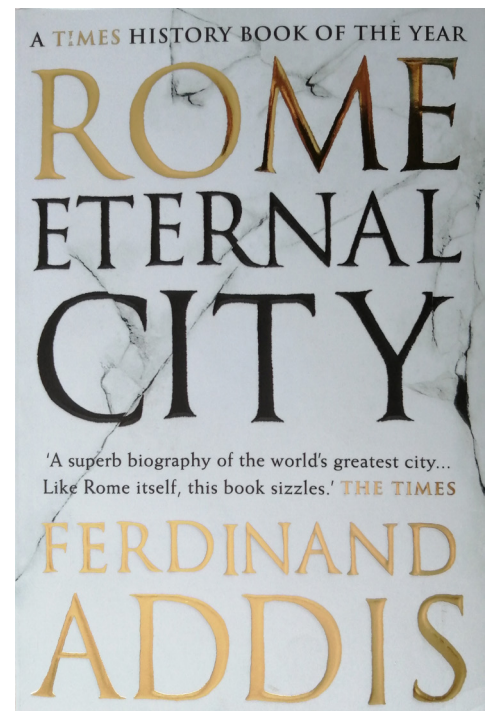
The (hi)story of Rome is told in 22 chapters, from its origins to modern times, following myths and archeological discoveries, as well as historical and literary writings. Reading this volume, we can learn many things about the mythic foundation of Rome in 753 BC or about the murder of Julius Caesar, the Roman dictator, in 44 BC; the coronation of the Frankish king, Charlemagne, in AD 800, Benito Mussolini’s March on Rome of 1922, or details about the release of Federico Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita* in 1960. All these – and many more – are, in fact, the subjects of Ferdinand Addis’s chapters. Each story completes the other one and so the history goes further beyond pure scientific facts, as Addis has the ability to write beautiful prose for a general audience.

The story starts in a time when “the twins and the wolf were timeless and divine. But the twins were also human. And to be human is to have a history. [...] The twins, like the seven *primaeval* hills, were given names: Remus and Romulus, the founders of Rome.” (p. 3) In case we wonder when this happened, Addis offers the answer: “Roman antiquarians even claimed to have worked out the date on which Romulus founded the city – 21 April 753 BC, in modern reckoning. Romans looking back over their own history sometimes named the years by the amount of time that had elapsed since the foundation of the city – *ab urbe condita*.” No one worries too much of this story was accurate or not. In fact, “the myth of Remus and Romulus served [...] as a point of origin. [...] The story was a fiction, but it was part of the city’s memory.” (p. 7) Ferdinand Addis’s volume starts from here, dealing, “so far as is possible, with historical facts – with real lives, lived in the Eternal City.” (p. 8)

The story proceeds with the rise of the Republic, and lavishes the usual amount of attention on Julius Caesar. Portraits of characters like Marcus Tullius Cicero, “a *novus homo*, a ‘new man’ with no great ancestors,” (p. 87) appear to consolidate the power of Caesar, and to reveal the intricate scheming that led to *Veni. Vidi. Vici* episode. (p. 97) On the other hand, “Caesar’s strategic *clementia* had been demonstrated again and again during

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civil wars, and there were many men watching his triumphs who owed their lives to it.” (p. 99) But different times ask for different measures. According to this logic, “in February 44 BC, the month of Lupercalia, Caesar took the title *dictator perpetuus* – dictator for life. The honours voted to him by his carefully packed senate had grown ever more extravagant. He was the first living Roman to have his head stamped on a coin. His statue was set up among the statues of the ancient kings on the Capitol. He was given the titles Father of his Country and *imperator*, and awarded the right to wear triumphal clothing on all formal occasions. Each new honour raised Caesar above his fellow man.” (p. 102)

The Caesar – Brutus – Marcus Antonius triangle is beautifully presented: “Brutus had offered Caesar up as a sacrifice to the spirit of the Roman republic. He thought that by killing his friend he could save the state. He was wrong. The republic had grown enormous, spread its dominion across half the world.” (p. 108)

Julius Caesar’s death, in 44 BC, had splintered the Roman elite. When Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso) was born, in 43 BC, the traditionalists were still dreaming of the restoration of the old republican system. It was a time of peace, but it didn’t last long. “His father belonged to an old family of the local aristocracy, [...] rich enough to buy his sons a proper education.” (p. 110) Ovid was destined for an education on poetry and literary appreciation. “There is almost nothing about Ovid’s life in the ancient sources: just a mention from Seneca the Elder, who saw him practicing rhetorical exercises. [...] The young Ovid, says Seneca, had a particularly fondness for a type of rhetorical performance called a *suasoria*, in which students would impersonate famous characters from history. It was a sign of things to come,” writes Addis (p. 116). Ovid’s life is like a love novel, full of intriguing stories and deceptions (in fact, Addis’s chapter on Ovid is called “The Art of Love”, after Ovid’s collection *Ars Amatoria*), but what interests me, as a Romanian, is his exile, in AD 8, “in the decaying Greek colony of Tomis, on the shore of the Black Sea.” (p. 131) Here, in “a backwater town in a Danube swamp,” Ovid wrote “his *Tristia* – his ‘sorrows’.” The *Tristia* consist of five books of elegiac poetry. Ovid died at Tomis in AD 17 or 18.

The chapter on Nero, “The Emperor’s Show,” offers an accurate account on “the diversity of religions [...] only rarely a source of friction. Romans were quite used to the idea that a person might devote themselves to one god or goddess above all others, depending on their own particular circumstances or station. It was possible to have very different sorts of religious life while staying well within the mainstream of Roman tradition.” (p. 135) In fact, many foreigners settled in Rome at that time, including “Africans and Spaniards, Greeks and Syrians, Egyptians and Jews.” “For gods as for people, Rome could be boundless in its appetite.” (p. 136) The limits of Roman tolerance were situated at the intersection of religion and politics. But in AD 19, “the Emperor Tiberius had tried to expel the Jews from the city. Then in AD 41, the Emperor Claudius had banned Jews from meeting at their synagogues.” (p. 139)

About Emperor Nero, the successor of Claudius, we are told that he was “still young, more or less – running a little to fat, despite a regime of regular enemas and emetics,

but energetic.” (p. 139) But Nero was the Emperor, and all he wanted was to perform, and so he did, “even before most of Rome burned to the ground.” (p. 147) In a final act, on 9 June in AD 68, he committed suicide. His death marked the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. “In the end, Nero could not play the tragic hero, nor even the good Roman. But posterity had another part lined up, and one not lacking in drama. [...] Poor Nero, who loved applause, turned out to be the Antichrist.” (pp. 151-152)

The Gladiators era and the inaugural games of the Colosseum are beautifully explained by Ferdinand Addis. The year was AD 80. Thousands have come in Rome, across the empire, to fill the empire’s newest monument: the Colosseum. “The ‘New Amphitheatre’, as it was called, was by far the largest in the known world, a vast oval bowl of travertine limestone – 100,000 cubic metres of rock, quarried out of the hills at Tivoli.” (p. 154) Emperor Titus opened the Colosseum with a magnificent show, specially designed to speak about his power. Gladiators, slaves, and exotic animals were brought into the arena to please the audience. During times, several legends were born, like Spartacus, the Thracian who led the rebellion against Romans. Even so, “the Romans loved their gladiators. Children dressed up as gladiators to play in the street. People had gladiators painted on their walls. [...] There were gladiator tables, gladiator lamps, gladiator winecups [...]. Women loved gladiators too much. [...] Romans loved gladiators but, even more, they loved to see gladiators die.” (pp. 172-173)

Other important moments from Rome (hi)story are told by Ferdinand Addis, like the short reign of Elagabalus, AD 218 to 222, conspicuous for sex scandals and religious controversy, or the story of Diocletian, “a *dominus* – a master,” (p. 200) who ruled Roman empire from AD 284 to 305, and was followed by “a soldierly and charismatic young man named Constantine.” (p. 201) Raised at Diocletian’s court in Nicomedia, Constantine would change the course of history, as he was the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity.

And the story of Rome, as seen by Ferdinand Addis, goes on and tells us about Michelangelo and his struggling with the Sistine Chapel ceiling, or Garibaldi’s heroic defence of the republic, or the cruelty of Mussolini’s fascist state, details about the Ghetto, or even about Federico Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita*, released in 1960.

The history of Rome spans over three millennia. It comprises the best and the worst of human civilization: love and death, piety and corruption, high art and low life, countless portraits of people who were born and died in the shadow of the greatest empire. “That, in the end, is what this book is about: humans trying, and often failing, to live in history.” (p. 589)

In *Rome: Eternal City*, his ambitious debut work of nonfiction, Ferdinand Addis gives his readers an elegant account of the city’s progress. The book is an incredible presentation of Rome’s (hi)story. Cultural, political, religious, social, and intellectual aspects of Roman society are extremely well explained. The references and the explanatory notes, as well as the index, the photographs or the maps, are extremely useful to the readers. With this volume, Ferdinand Addis brings to life the myth of Rome.