

## REVIEW

### CAESAR, CICERO, AND AUGUSTUS

Christian Meier, *Die Ohnmacht des allmächtigen Dictators Caesar. Drei biographische Skizzen* (2nd revised edition). Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2015. Pp. 274. Paperback, €24.00. ISBN 978-3-515-09214-2.

This is a book written for the general reader without footnotes or references. The title refers to the impotence of the all-powerful dictator Caesar, but the book is not exclusively focused on Caesar, and it is not interested in the limits of his power to dictate. No mention is made, for example, of the mutinies of Caesar's armies in the civil war period, nor is there any discussion of the opposition faced by Caesar's agents in the implementation of his plan to find land, without resorting to wholesale confiscations, to settle his civil war veterans in Italy. For Meier, it is enough that Caesar made a start on grandiose projects such as the draining of the Pontine Marshes and the construction of a canal through the Isthmus of Corinth (82). The fact that many if not most of his plans remained unrealised at the time of his death is not considered important. Meier insists that Caesar was an all-powerful dictator who was impotent only in his inability to change the Roman political system and solve the crisis of the Late Republic. It is only once, in a few short sentences, that Caesar's impotence is discussed (105). The preceding one hundred pages are devoted to a biographical sketch of Caesar's life and career in which the reader is subjected to the monotonous repetition of the idea that the Late Republic was a period of 'crisis with no alternative'. Meier argues that there was a permanent crisis because no reform movement or social class offered a coherent alternative to the broken system of senatorial hegemony (11–13). Caesar's portrayal as an all-powerful dictator thus highlights the scale of the problem that he was unable to solve. But it is surely more useful to challenge the assumption that there were no limits on Caesar's power to dictate, and to note that he was unable even to complete his flagship building projects: the Forum Iulium, for example, was begun shortly after 54, yet it remained unfinished at its dedication in 46. If Caesar could not even complete the construction of a temple and portico, how can it be assumed that he had any realistic chance of solving the problems of the Late Republic?

Meier's discussion of Caesar (17–106) is followed by two biographical sketches of Cicero (107–210) and Augustus (211–74). The section on Augustus is excellent: it offers a concise and compelling narrative of the future emperor's rise to power, giving emphasis to the year 36 as a turning point in the events

which led to the establishment of the Principate. Much has been written on Augustus, but Meier's treatment is on a par with the best and definitely worth reading. The sections on Caesar and Cicero are much less effective, because the biographical narrative is broken up by too many digressions on the workings of Roman politics and the historical background of the Late Republic. There is also far too much repetition of the assertion that there was no alternative to the crisis of the Late Republic, a hypothesis outlined by Meier in his monograph *Res publica amissa: eine Studie zu Verfassung und Geschichte der späten römischen Republik*, published in 1966 (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag). This idea is now fifty years old, and it was far from new when the first edition of the book under review was published in 1980.

*University College Dublin*

ALEXANDER THEIN  
alexander.thein@ucd.ie