



## *Commanders and Command in the Roman Republic and Early Empire*

by Fred K. Drogula.

Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2015. Pp. x, 422. ISBN 978-1-4696-2126-5.

Review by Jeremy Armstrong, The University of Auckland ([js.armstrong@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:js.armstrong@auckland.ac.nz)).

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In this volume, Fred Drogula (Providence College) investigates a traditional subject in ancient military history: the nature of Roman military command as it evolved during the Roman Republic (509–31 BC). The dynamics of Republican-era generals' control over armies, provinces, and citizens has long been seen as the key to understanding Roman history—"the history of the Roman Republic is, to a large extent, the history of its military commanders and the campaigns they led" (1). Grasping the relationships between Roman commanders and both their armies and the state is critical to writing an adequate narrative history of Rome, particularly during the tumultuous years when civil wars between Marius and Sulla, Caesar and Pompey, and Octavian and Antony ushered in a new political order based on the domination of "private" or "client" armies.

Although scholars have investigated this topic in great detail since the early nineteenth century, the nuances still elude us. The more we learn about Roman authority and command in the Republic, the more confusing and contradictory they seem to become. One cause for this is lack of evidence. The Roman Republic spanned, according to tradition, almost 500 years, but Romans only began to write histories of their city around 200 BC, and most of our evidence on military command comes from the final century of the Republic, when long established military and civil structures were breaking down. Consequently, scholars seeking to understand these systems in their "original" form and context must rely on relatively late sources, including the work of the second-century BC Greek historian Polybius. A further problem is that, since Roman writers normally saw their city and its institutions as eternal and unchanging, they tended to project late Republican institutions and conditions back into earlier periods, for which they had little or no hard evidence. For all these reasons, Drogula's task in exploring military command in the Roman Republic is a daunting one. He has, nevertheless, managed to present a balanced and innovative argument. The scale and detail of his analyses are impressive, and the conclusions he reaches will repay careful reflection.

The book's useful introduction outlines the present state of the historical question and indicates the broad, theoretical approach the author has adopted. Although Drogula delves deeply into pertinent details of specific issues, most notably in chapter 2, his eyes are ultimately on the big picture and the core theme of Roman command slowly transforming over time.

The first three chapters survey the development of military command in archaic Rome, from the end of the regal period up to 367 BC. Modern historians are sharply divided over the extent to which reliable information from this period was, if at all, available to later Roman authors writing historical accounts of the early city. These disagreements have intensified as archaeological finds have provided new evidence. Drogula, however, finds a way through academic minefields to present some persuasive arguments about Roman military command in the early Republic, even within the confines of a single-volume study. Still, one feels he is always looking at the earlier period through the lens of the late Republic.

In chapter 1, “Concepts and Traditions of Military Leadership in Early Rome,” Drogula advances a reasonably cogent theory of the mentality behind the creation and evolution of Rome’s archaic military magistracies, including early consuls (likely called *praetors*), the *decemviri* (panel of ten), the enigmatic “consular tribunes,” and, finally, the true consulship itself in 367 BC. His characterization of the evidence (and scholarly debates about it) is generally very good, as is his ultimate conclusion—that military command during the Republic changed in response to the evolving relations between the Roman state and the local, clan-based aristocracy.

Chapter 2, “Fundamental Concepts of Authority in Early Rome,” explicates the underlying principles of command in archaic Rome—namely, *imperium* (military authority), *auspicium* (religious authority), and *potestas* (magisterial authority). This is a subject of particular strength for the author and he devotes almost a hundred pages to the subtleties of several complicated arguments about it; he also moves away from the flexible approach of chapter 1 toward a stricter, more legalistic manner of argumentation. In the end, however, he relies too heavily on evidence and interpretations more relevant to the *late* Republic than to his stated target period.

In chapter 3, Drogula offers an interesting interpretation of *provincia* (commander’s field of responsibility), that sees it as not simply an area of command or responsibility, but as the primary mechanism by which the Roman state limited, controlled, and differentiated military commands.

On the most basic level, the *provincia* defined the task that any military commander was to undertake and gave purpose and definition to his *imperium*. On a deeper level, by defining the area in which a commander’s use of his *imperium* was supreme and unrestricted, the *provincia* also limited the sphere in which his *imperium* could be used to full effect. Because the *provincia* imposed a restriction or limitation on the commander’s use of his *imperium*, it probably evolved as part of the early republic’s efforts to constrain freebooting tendencies of its warrior aristocracy and to assert the state’s absolute control over the authorization and use of military force. (180)

*Provincia* quickly emerges as a leitmotif of the book—a vital, yet elastic, concept in the Roman approach to command. Here, as in chapter 2, the engaging detail and discerning analyses are far too often more germane to the late Republic than to events of the fifth and fourth centuries BC.

Chapter 4, “The Development of the Classical Constitution,” explores Roman military leadership structures and positions between 367 and 197 BC, most notably the “new” praetorship, prorogation, and the investing of private citizens with *imperium*. Blending evidence, logic, and common sense, the rather polemical discussion here stakes out some interesting positions, most notably that both the praetors and the consuls of 367 BC initially belonged to a single college of equal magistrates.

Chapter 5, “From Command to Governance,” concerns the changing definition of *provincia* and gradual shift from a task-oriented mentality to a preoccupation with controlling territory. Drogula convincingly shows that Rome’s newly won empire in the third and second centuries BC slowly forced the senate to rethink the categories of military commanders, perhaps leading to a firm distinction between consuls, who continued as the preeminent commanders, and praetors, who became military governors.

The book’s two concluding chapters trace the development of Roman military command down into the murky waters of the late Republican and Augustan periods. In chapter 6, “The Late Republic,” Drogula takes a revolutionary, yet entirely plausible position on the meaning of offices and *provincia* to men like Marius, Sulla, and Caesar, and how the structures of military command shaped their choices. In chapter 7, “Augustan Manipulation of Traditional Ideas of Provincial Governance,” Drogula maintains that Augustus’s military commands marked the culmination of the developments he dis-

cusses in previous chapters. He contends that the emperor shrewdly chose from a myriad of precedents in construing both *imperium* and *provincia* in his great “settlement” of 27 BC.

Although written in an eminently accessible style and featuring a common-sense approach, this is not a book for neophytes. However, students of Roman military history and others able to follow the author’s detailed use of previous scholarship and copious citations of ancient examples and evidence will find his argumentation forceful and instructive—both on the whole and in its discrete elements. Fred Drogula’s best contribution is his clarification of the concept of *provincia* as essential to understanding the evolution of Roman command. The author argues that, while *imperium* was important, it was always closely linked to and bound by the concept of *provincia*. If, as he believes, the evidence suggests that alterations in the concepts of *imperium* and *auspicium* were minimal during the Republic, then subtle shifts in the meaning of *provincia* help us better explain more conspicuous and dramatic changes in Roman command.