

[BMCR 2016.03.40](#) on the BMCR blog

Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2016.03.40

Carsten Hjort Lange, Frederik Juliaan Vervaeet (ed.), *The Roman Republican Triumph: Beyond the Spectacle. Analecta Romana Instituti Danici. Supplementum, 45*. Roma: Edizioni Quasar, 2014. Pp. 261. ISBN 9788871405766. €32.00 (pb).

**Reviewed by Fred K. Drogula, Providence College
(fdrogula@providence.edu)**

[Table of Contents](#)

Few ceremonies are as evocative of the power and grandeur of ancient Rome as the triumph, when a laurelled general—dressed in royal purple and mounted on a chariot—paraded his victorious soldiers through the streets of Rome, displaying their spoils of war as well as their defeated enemies. Only the greatest victories were honored with a triumph, and therefore this public recognition usually became the pinnacle of a man’s career. Century after century, the Romans used the triumph to celebrate their conquest of peoples and territories, so the long sequence of triumphs was a record of the growth of the Roman Empire itself. Yet, despite its long history and cultural significance, much about the triumph remains uncertain and debated.

This book arises from a workshop held at the Danish Institute in Rome in January 2013, and it represents the efforts of an international group of scholars to better understand the triumph, its development, and its place in Roman society. The editors—Carsten Hjort Lange and Frederik Juliaan Vervaeet—have done a wonderful job bringing forward for publication twelve articles that provide new insight into the triumph during the Republican Era. Each article is well written, rich in detail, and valuable to those wishing to understand better this hallmark Roman institution.

The twelve essays that make up the book are organized into five sections, the first of which contains three articles that focus on “Triumphal Conventions.” Christoph Lundgreen’s chapter, “Rules for Obtaining a Triumph—the *ius triumphandi* Once More,” provides a solid start for the collection by arguing that there were no fixed rules for obtaining a triumph, but rather that triumphs were awarded based on “the interplay between flexible principles for military criteria and clear rules for personal criteria” (27). The article focuses on the role of the senate as arbitrator of requests for triumphs, and contains a useful list of

particularly interesting triumphal debates that illustrate the flexibility that existed in the granting of triumphs. Richard Westall's article, "Triumph and Closure: Between History and Literature," explores the use of triumphs as literary devices to bring closure to historical narratives, and argues that the triumph evoked a similar response in Greek and Latin authors. Westall warns that the paucity of the evidence makes firm conclusions difficult, but he explores the significance of this literary use of the triumph in surviving works. The final chapter of this section, "Claiming Triumphs for Recovered Territories: Reflections on Valerius Maximus 2.8.4" by Christopher James Dart and Frederik Juliaan Vervaet, studies Valerius' statement that triumphs could only be given to those who had conquered new territory and expanded the empire (*pro aucto imperio*). Looking at several historical examples, they argue that Valerius was wrong to identify this as a concrete rule, since it was really a principle or rationale the Senate could use to justify its decisions on whether or not to grant a triumph "in consideration of specific geopolitical circumstances" (63). These three articles demonstrate that the Republican triumph was a powerful-but-flexible concept; it was a clear and evocative idea in the minds of ancient writers, but it was rooted in custom rather than law, and therefore its definition was sufficiently elastic to accommodate changes in Roman warfare and politics.

The second section of the book focuses on the Middle Republic and contains two essays. The first, "The Triumph Outside the City: Voices of Protest in the Middle Republic" by Carsten Hjort Lange, argues that triumphs celebrated on the Alban Mount were originally protests made by commanders who had been denied the privilege of an official triumph through Rome, but under Caesar and Augustus these Alban triumphs retroactively gained official recognition in triumphal lists as the young emperor sought to justify his own actions. Thus the significance of the Alban triumph changed as Rome fell under the power of one man. Matteo Cadario's article, "Preparing for Triumph. *Graecae Artes* as Roman Booty in L. Mummius' Campaign (146 BC)," argues that victorious Roman commanders often put great thought into their confiscation and distribution of artworks taken by defeated enemies in Greece. While much was sent back to Rome for display in triumphs and eventual dedication as *ornamenta* in Rome and in Italian cities, cautious commanders would give some of these spoils to Roman allies, would return artwork that had been previously stolen to its original owners, and would leave a great deal of the captured art in place in Greece, inscribing their own names on sacred pieces to celebrate their own victories and to display their piety to the gods.

The third section of the book focuses on the Late Republic, and contains four articles. In the first, "Notes on Cn. Domitius Ahenobarbus' Victory and Triumph over the Arverni," Jesper Carlsen provides a close study of Ahenobarbus' Gallic campaign and triumph, and in particular his reported use of treachery to achieve his victory, and his unusual victory monument and procession through his province. This close study reveals ways that generals could commemorate their victories beyond a triumph in Rome. Jesper Majbom Madsen follows this with an article titled "The Loser's Prize: Roman Triumphs

and Political Strategies during the Mithridatic Wars,” which studies the four triumphs held over King Mithridates VI Eupator. The fact that three Roman commanders (Sulla, Murena, and Lucullus) received triumphs over Mithridates without actually destroying the king or removing him from power demonstrates that—by the Late Republic— political considerations (rather than concrete rules) played the decisive role in determining whether a commander was granted a triumph for his victories. Frederik Juliaan Vervaeet’s article “*Si neque leges neque mores cogunt: Beyond the Spectacle of Pompeius Magnus’ Public Triumphs*” comes next in the section, and argues that Pompey’s triumphs violated many traditions and established bad precedents for later commanders to follow. Vervaeet shows that, in Pompey’s quest for glory, he used intimidation and threats to coerce the senate into granting triumphs for his dubious victories, which included claiming credit for other commanders’ work and celebrating the defeat and death of Roman citizens. By violating conventional practice to obtain triumphs, Pompey intensified competition for honors, contributing to the crisis of 49 BC. The final article in the section is Josiah Osgood’s “Julius Caesar and Spanish Triumph-Hunting,” which argues that Caesar made winning a triumph his primary concern during his praetorian command in Further Spain, and that his campaigns demonstrate his awareness of what kinds of achievements would earn him a triumph (such as campaigning beyond the limits of Roman territory). Osgood also explains how Caesar’s friendship with Balbus was mutually beneficial, and how Caesar’s need to abandon his claim on a Spanish triumph influenced his later behavior during his Gallic command.

The fourth section of the book includes two articles on “Civil War and Triumph.” In “A Ritual Against the Rule? The Representation of Civil War Victory in the Late Republican Triumph,” Wolfgang Havener argues that civil war commanders circumvented the obvious incompatibility of civil war and triumph by staging their triumphs in such a way as to separate and distinguish between conquered Romans and conquered foreign foes. It was a balancing act, and generals like Caesar were criticized if they did not sufficiently downplay their conquest of fellow citizens. Havener concludes by looking at how Octavian used his civil war triumph to consolidate power and advertise the end to civil war. Ida Östenberg similarly deals with the problem of celebrating civil war victory in her article “Triumph and Spectacle. Victory Celebrations in the Late Republican Civil Wars.” She argues that civil war triumphs generally failed as victory celebrations because they commemorated the defeat and death of Roman citizens, even if those citizens were not depicted in the triumphal procession. As a consequence, Cicero, Caesar, and Augustus sought other ways to honor these victories, including Greek-style war memorials (which were not successful) and manipulation of the Roman calendar (which proved more effective). These two articles shine light on the flexibility and limitations of the triumph as a victory celebration, and they show how great men sought to manipulate victory commemorations for their own benefit.

The final section of the book is John Rich’s article “The Triumph in the Roman Republic: Frequency, Fluctuation and Policy.” This article is much longer than

the other contributions, and the editors rightly refer to it as the capstone of the volume (13). In this article, Rich constructs a list containing all known Republican triumphs and—by analyzing the amount of space that would have been occupied by the missing sections of the Capitoline triumphal lists—he calculates the approximate number of ‘lost’ triumphs that do not appear anywhere in the record. After discussing the reliability of the triumphal list, he divides it into periods to study the frequency with which triumphs were granted throughout the Republic, as well as the frequency of ovations, naval triumphs, and Alban Mount triumphs, and the numbers of triumphs celebrated by different types of Roman commanders. Rich then proceeds to analyze this data to show how the awarding of triumphs changed as Rome’s empire grew. He is cautious with his data and allows that our information on the early Republic is dubious, but his analysis of later periods explains the fluctuations in the frequency of triumphs, and it reveals how the concept of the triumph gradually evolved as Roman warfare changed. For example, Rich argues that the ovation was introduced and popularized as a means to reward a commander who had fulfilled the traditional expectations of a triumph, but whose victory was somehow problematic, either because of the status of the commander or the nature of his victory. Although Rich maintains a narrow focus on analyzing his list of triumphs, his article will be essential reading for anyone interested in the Republican triumph.

This collection appears at a timely moment, when modern scholarship is increasingly interested in the Roman triumph. The editors provide a useful description of recent scholarly work on the triumph in their introduction to the volume, but one of the most fundamental debates centers on the rules and regulations that gave structure to the triumph: should we accept the reports of later (often imperial) authors that there were concrete requirements that determined whether a commander’s victory deserved the honor of a triumph, or should we discard these reports as later developments or inventions? What do we make of the contradiction that M. Claudius Marcellus was denied a triumph in 211 BC because he failed to bring his army back to Rome from Syracuse, but later generals who likewise left their armies in their provinces had no difficulty obtaining triumphs? The authors in this collection generally take the view that the qualifications for a triumph were not concrete rules, but rather principles or expectations that could shift and evolve over time. Thus at any one moment in time the Roman senate might have a very clear conception of what was required for a commander to receive a triumph, but these expectations evolved as the senate, the empire, and the nature of Roman warfare changed. This view is very sensible and no doubt correct, and it enables the authors in this collection to resolve some old problems and to make clear and persuasive arguments.

All twelve of the articles in this collection are well written and researched, and each provides new arguments and valuable insight into aspects of the Republican triumph. The diversity of topics makes this book particularly interesting and engaging, and there is a great deal that will interest historians of all periods of Republican Rome. Indeed, many of these articles are certain to become essential reading for anyone interested in the triumph. Each article

provides its own bibliography, the entire collection is well edited and organized, and it is beautifully put together. Overall, this is an important and engaging collection of essays, and a very fine work.

[Read comments on this review or add a comment on the BMCR blog](#)

[Home](#) [Read Latest](#) [Archives](#) [BMCR Blog](#) [About BMCR](#) [Review for BMCR](#) [Commentaries](#) [Support BMCR](#)

BMCR, Bryn Mawr College, 101 N. Merion Ave., Bryn Mawr, PA 19010