

## **Beyond Decline: Methodological Approaches to Crisis in the Late Roman Republic.**

### **Introduction**

In this assignment, I outline the methodological and theoretical frameworks that underpin my project on the “crisis of the Roman Republic.” This project begins from the premise that “crisis” is not a neutral descriptive label. It is a powerful organising concept that can illuminate real pressures and points of rupture, but it also risks flattening complexity if treated as self-explanatory. I therefore approach “crisis” as a category requiring definition and testing rather than assumption, particularly because the late Republic has been discussed so extensively that no single framing can plausibly exhaust the evidence or the debate.<sup>1</sup>

This project does not attempt to definitively “prove” that the Republic was or was not in crisis in a binary sense. Instead, the focus is on how crisis is constructed—first, in ancient narratives that present the last century of the Republic through moralised explanation and retrospective coherence; and second, in modern scholarship, where “crisis” often functions as a shorthand for wider patterns of change.<sup>2</sup> The objective is not to dismiss crisis-language as incorrect, but to demonstrate that different definitions of crisis perform different explanatory work, and that being explicit about those definitions improves historical argument and interpretive precision.<sup>3</sup>

To achieve this, I employ three complementary frameworks. First, I apply rhetorical and genre-based source criticism to treat ancient historiography as a form of persuasive writing shaped by conventions rather than straightforward reportage.<sup>4</sup> Second, I adopt a conceptual-historical approach to “crisis” itself, drawing on scholarship that highlights the term’s polysemy and its relationship to periodisation and analytical perspective.<sup>5</sup> Third, I utilise reflexive periodisation, treating the segmentation of time as an interpretive act that determines what qualifies as explanation, continuity, or rupture.<sup>6</sup> The overall aim is to handle the topic with nuance: acknowledging why crisis has been an attractive and productive lens, while resisting its use as an all-purpose explanation.

### **Framework I: Rhetorical and Genre-Based Source Criticism**

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<sup>1</sup> Federico Santangelo, “The Crisis of the Roman Republic: Archaeology of a Concept,” *Historika* 11 (2022), pp. 303–304.

<sup>2</sup> Santangelo, “The Crisis of the Roman Republic,” pp. 303–304, 454–455.

<sup>3</sup> Santangelo, “The Crisis of the Roman Republic,” pp. 303–305

<sup>4</sup> A. J. Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography: Four Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. x–xi

<sup>5</sup> Santangelo, “The Crisis of the Roman Republic,” pp. 303–304.

<sup>6</sup> Harriet I. Flower, *Roman Republics* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), Preface and Introduction

I prioritise rhetorical and genre-based source criticism not because ancient texts are “unreliable,” but because ancient historians and biographers operated within literary and rhetorical expectations that shaped what constituted a persuasive account. Woodman argues that classical historiography must be understood on its own terms: as a practice closely linked to rhetoric, and viewed in antiquity as closer to poetry than to modern “scientific” historiography.<sup>7</sup> This distinction is significant for a study of crisis because ancient crisis-narratives are often constructed through literary techniques—such as contrast, moral decline, exemplary characterisation, and dramatic turning points—rather than explicit political theory.

Rhetorical analysis does not replace historical analysis; rather, it clarifies the nature of the source text to ensure responsible usage. Practically, this involves reading ancient accounts with attention to genre conventions, narrative structure and selection, moral framing, and rhetorical strategies such as praise or blame, staged speech, and implied audience. Woodman’s discussion of historiography’s relationship with epideictic oratory is particularly relevant, as it highlights how praise and blame can be foundational to the genre.<sup>8</sup> Where a narrative is structured around these elements, the impression of political breakdown may be intensified by the author’s moral priorities and rhetorical logic.

This framework avoids an unhelpful binary between “true history” and “mere rhetoric.” Woodman demonstrates that ancient theory could legitimise forms of invention that modern readers might misinterpret as deviations from truth-telling.<sup>9</sup> This does not imply dishonesty on the part of ancient historians; rather, it indicates that “truth” was mediated through culturally specific conventions of plausibility. Rhetorical analysis therefore distinguishes referential claims from explanatory and evaluative choices, allowing narrative form to be assessed alongside evidential content.

In the context of the late Republic, this distinction is crucial, as many texts actively organise events as symptoms of decline. A moralising narrative can render conflict seemingly inevitable by linking diverse events to a single causal trajectory. Rhetorical reading allows for the identification of where “crisis” is produced as an effect of narrative design, without reducing authors to caricatures. At the same time, I remain alert to the risk of overcorrection—treating all crisis-language as purely rhetorical. I mitigate this by using rhetorical criticism as a contextual layer rather than a final verdict, ensuring that narrative analysis strengthens rather than undermines historical explanation.

## **Framework II: Conceptual History and the Polysemy of “Crisis”**

Conceptually, I treat “crisis” as a historically contingent analytical term whose meaning should not be assumed. Santangelo’s “archaeology of a concept” is central here because it delineates both the utility and instability of crisis-language in modern scholarship. Santangelo observes that while

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<sup>7</sup> Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography*, Prologue, pp. x–xi.

<sup>8</sup> Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography*, pp. 95–96.

<sup>9</sup> Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography*, Prologue, pp. x–xi.

indiscriminate uses of “crisis” are often criticised, the term remains attractive because it foregrounds tension, conflict, and outcomes.<sup>10</sup> This prevents a simplistic rejection of the category and instead prompts a more precise enquiry: what kind of crisis is meant, and what does that definition allow a historian to claim?

Santangelo usefully links “crisis” to periodisation and analytical perspective.<sup>11</sup> If crisis describes a short-term emergency, it produces a different narrative than if it describes a long-term structural condition. Drawing on Koselleck’s typology, Santangelo shows that “crisis” may signify a decisive turning point, a culminating moment requiring action, or recurrent conditions with long-term consequences.<sup>12</sup> Rather than selecting a single definition, I use this typology to map how historians shift between meanings.

This framework enables a nuanced critique by framing disagreement as conceptual rather than erroneous. A historian describing an “open-ended” crisis may operate with a different definition than one who views the period as a decisive moment.<sup>13</sup> The issue is not that one approach is necessarily flawed, but that debate becomes obscured if definitions remain implicit. This project seeks to clarify those differences and test their explanatory consequences.

Santangelo also cautions that crisis can become a vague shorthand for historical change, diminishing its analytical value.<sup>14</sup> To avoid this, I treat crisis as an instrument: useful only when specified, bounded, and tied to observable questions. Skinner reinforces this position by insisting that understanding ideas requires attention to historical context and the limits of meaning.<sup>15</sup> Anachronism arises not only from factual error, but from treating concepts as timeless containers.<sup>16</sup> Applied here, this cautions against assuming that ancient descriptions of instability map neatly onto modern crisis-language.

Crucially, this framework treats scholarly disagreement with care. Rather than claiming that historians “misuse” the language of crisis, it recognises that the term is employed in multiple defensible ways that reflect differing conceptual commitments and analytical priorities. In doing so, it

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<sup>10</sup> Santangelo, “The Crisis of the Roman Republic,” p. 303.

<sup>11</sup> Santangelo, “The Crisis of the Roman Republic,” pp. 303–304.

<sup>12</sup> Santangelo, “The Crisis of the Roman Republic,” pp. 303–304.

<sup>13</sup> Santangelo, “The Crisis of the Roman Republic,” pp. 304–305.

<sup>14</sup> Santangelo, “The Crisis of the Roman Republic,” pp. 454–455.

<sup>15</sup> Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969), pp. 48–49.

<sup>16</sup> Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” pp. 39–40 and 48–50.

approaches disagreement as a matter of methodological perspective rather than interpretive error, and thus constitutes a critique of method rather than a dismissal of existing scholarship.

### **Framework III: Periodisation, Teleology, and the Shape of Republican Time**

My third framework addresses periodisation and teleology. Flower's work is central, as she argues that periodisation is a foundational interpretive act rather than a neutral organisational tool. Using the analogy of punctuation, she demonstrates how segmentation directs historical meaning.<sup>17</sup> This is significant for the study of crisis because "the crisis of the Republic" is often tied to a traditional time-map, encouraging retrospective and teleological interpretation.

In her Preface, Flower explains how questioning the use of "crisis" for the period 133–49 BCE revealed the extent to which a single, long crisis has become an ingrained assumption.<sup>18</sup> Importantly, her approach is not dismissive; she presents re-periodisation as an alternative perspective rather than a refutation of existing scholarship.<sup>19</sup> This models the type of critique adopted here: refining interpretive tools rather than rejecting prior work.

Building on this, I treat periodisation as a methodological choice that can either reinforce or resist teleology. Reading backwards from the Principate risks converting contingency into inevitability. Santangelo similarly warns that crisis-language can render long-term continuity an undifferentiated backdrop if used imprecisely.<sup>20</sup> Flower's response is not to deny the Republic's collapse, but to resist narrating it as the natural life-cycle of a monolithic entity.<sup>21</sup>

Rather than assuming a single periodisation, I ask what each framework highlights and obscures. A focus on breakdown foregrounds violence and institutional strain, while alternative periodisations emphasise adaptation and contingency. This allows "crisis" to be treated not as a totalising label, but as a question about which domains were under pressure, and for whom.

### **Methodological Synthesis and Contribution**

Taken together, these frameworks provide a structured way to engage a heavily debated theme without oversimplification. Rhetorical source criticism addresses narrative construction, conceptual history clarifies analytical categories, and reflexive periodisation interrogates the temporal frameworks that shape interpretation.

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<sup>17</sup> Flower, *Roman Republics*, Introduction.

<sup>18</sup> Flower, *Roman Republics*, Preface.

<sup>19</sup> Flower, *Roman Republics*, Preface.

<sup>20</sup> Santangelo, "The Crisis of the Roman Republic," pp. 447–448.

<sup>21</sup> Flower, *Roman Republics*, Introduction.

The contribution of this project is methodological rather than corrective: to show that debate about the “crisis of the Republic” often turns on differences in rhetorical framing, conceptual definition, and periodising choice. Santangelo’s argument that crisis should be productively problematised rather than discarded aligns closely with this approach.<sup>22</sup> Success, therefore, lies not in settling whether the Republic was “in crisis,” but in clarifying how crisis operates as a descriptive and explanatory category.

## Conclusion

I have outlined the methodological and theoretical frameworks for my project on crisis in the late Roman Republic. Rather than treating “crisis” as either an incontrovertible reality or a simple distortion, I approach it as a contested concept that requires careful definition. By combining rhetorical source criticism, conceptual history, and reflexive periodisation, this approach aims to strengthen interpretation through nuance, clarifying how different meanings of crisis shape explanation, periodisation, and the perceived inevitability—or contingency—of Republican collapse.

Foregrounding methodological choice also has implications beyond the specific case of the late Roman Republic. “Crisis” is a term frequently employed across historical subfields to organise narratives of instability, transition, or change. The frameworks outlined here suggest that such usage is most productive when accompanied by explicit attention to definition, scale, and temporal framing. Rather than seeking to eliminate crisis-language, this project treats it as a heuristic whose explanatory power depends on careful calibration. In this sense, its contribution lies not in resolving debate, but in clarifying the terms on which debate proceeds, and in maintaining analytical space for contingency, alternative trajectories, and competing historical interpretations.

## Bibliography

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<sup>22</sup> Santangelo, “The Crisis of the Roman Republic,” p.454.