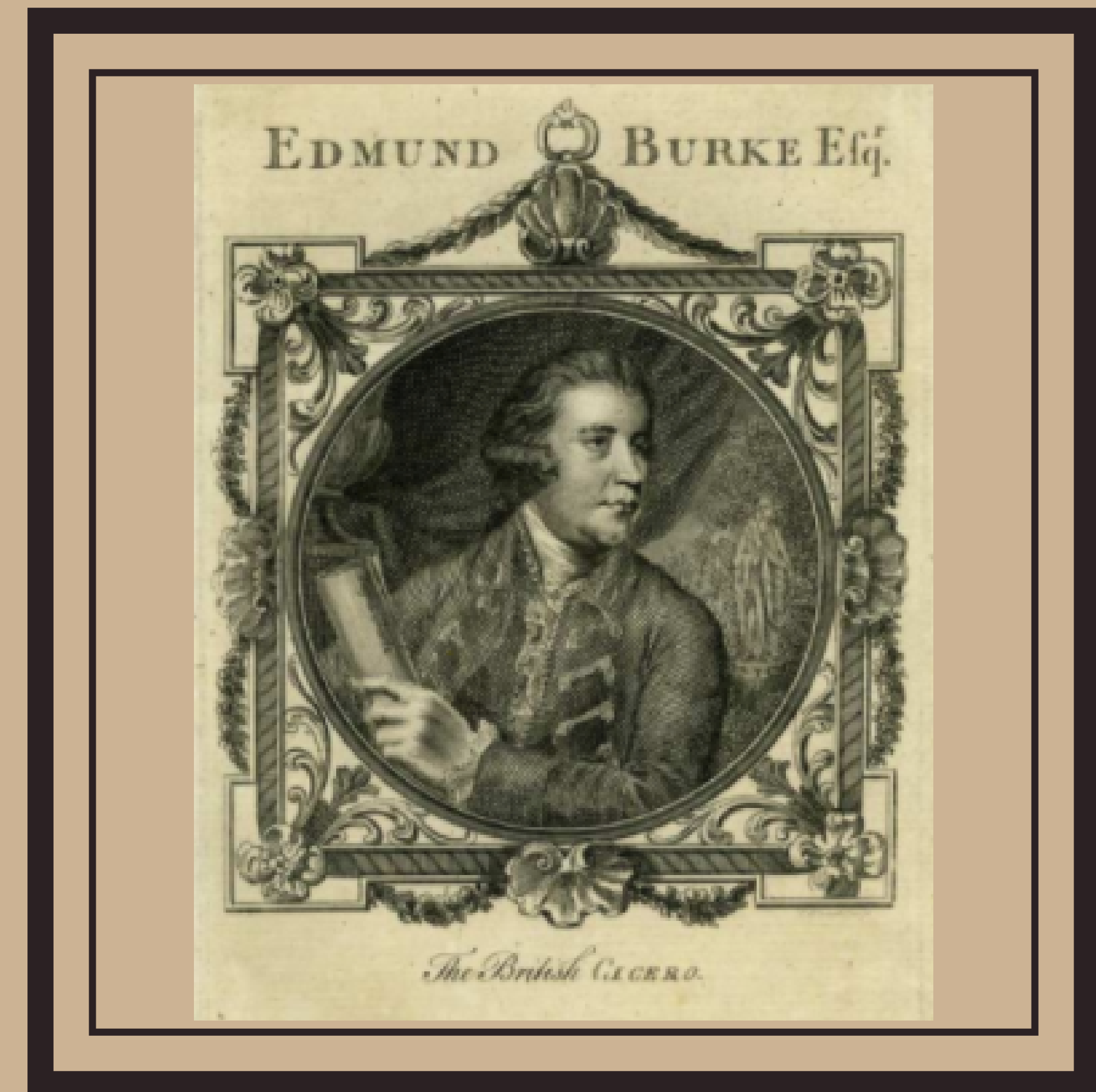


"The Legislators of Mankind"

Ideas of Rome in the Thought of Edmund Burke

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Introduction

The history of Ancient Rome has possessed a crucial and enduring importance for political philosophy. The narratives of republic and empire have given theorists from Niccolò Machiavelli to Hannah Arendt space to examine the boundaries of democratic politics, to probe the causes of factionalism and tyranny, and ultimately elucidate the principles on which just and balanced polities are established. The eighteenth century statesman and thinker Edmund Burke is no exception to this tradition. Considering Rome's enduring importance to political theory, it is all the more surprising that no study has yet attempted to reconstruct and characterize Edmund Burke's views on and use of Roman history throughout his political thought.

Objectives

1. Understand contemporary views on Roman history in the 18th century. Who influenced Burke? Which Roman authors influence Burke?
2. Reconstruct Burke's stated understanding of Roman history and its central characters and institutions. What did he see as integral to Rome's process of ascent and decay?
3. Evaluate the impact on Burke's opinions on the the British Constitution, British Empire, and the French Revolution. How did Burke relate to these concepts and events through the Roman experience?



Results

1. French philosopher Montesquieu's insights on Rome heavily influenced Burke's views. Though Burke has a more favorable view of the Roman Empire. Roman writers like Cicero, Livy, and Tacitus also shape Burke's thought.
2. Nonetheless, Burke cultivated a sophisticated and unique understanding of Roman history that helped him understand the political issues of his day.
3. The history of political parties and interest groups in Ancient Rome justifies his view of the necessity of political parties.
4. The indirect rule of the Romans in Britain serves as a model for Burke's idea of the British Empire.
5. The shared legacy of Roman civilization is the common glue that will unite Europe against the French Revolution.

Who was Edmund Burke?

A philosopher and maverick politician, Burke is most famous for his criticism of the French Revolution in his book *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Written in 1790, his book analyzed the dynamics of mass revolutions, and how their attempts to uproot traditional institutions like the monarchy, the Church, and aristocracy would end in violence and anarchy. In doing this, he correctly predicted the reign of terror, Napoleon Bonaparte's rise to power. Because of his trenchant critiques of natural rights and absolute democracy, and his defense of the historically accumulated wisdom embodied by inherited institutions and customs, he is often referred to as the father of modern conservatism. Burke is also remembered for his defense of the rights of peoples across the British Empire, including Irish Catholics, American colonists, and Indians living under the East India Co. As a result of his accomplishments in philosophy and politics, Burke is regarded as one of the foremost intellectuals and statesmen of the 18th century.

Conclusions

1. The legacy of Rome holds a key and under-appreciated place in Burke's political thought.
2. Burke engages with the history not only in a rhetorical or polemic sense, but also as means of understanding the institutional and theoretical basis for free and just political systems
3. Classical literatures remains an immensely important source of insight for modern political theory.

