



A History of the Later Roman Empire AD 284-641. The Transformation of the Ancient World, by Stephen Mitchell. Blackwell History of the Ancient World. Blackwell Publishing, 2007. ISBN: 1405108568. 469pp.

Reviewed by Charles F Pazdernik
Grand Valley State University
pazdernc@gvsu.edu

Stephen Mitchell's work is situated, as the author (hereafter, M) acknowledges in his preface (xiv), firmly within the historiographical tradition established by Edward Gibbon and represented by the works of, among others, Bury, Stein, Jones, Demandt, and the editors and contributors of the thirteenth and fourteenth volumes of the current edition of the *Cambridge Ancient History*.¹ It shares with those works the project of constructing a narrative of which "the later Roman empire" is

¹ J. B. Bury, *The Later Roman Empire from the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian (395-565)*, 2 vols. (2nd ed., London, 1923); E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire I. De l'état romain à l'état byzantin (284-476)*, transl. J.-R. Palanque, II. *De la disparition de l'empire de l'occident à la mort de Justinien (476-565)* (Bruges, 1959; Paris, 1949); A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602. A Social, Economic and Administrative Survey*, (Oxford, 1964); A. Demandt, *Die Spätantike. Römische Geschichte von Diocletian bis Justinian 284-565 n. Chr.* (Berlin, 1989); A. Cameron and P. Garnsey, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History, Vol. 13, The Late Empire, AD 337-425* (Cambridge, 1997); A. Cameron, B. Ward-Perkins, and M. Whitby, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History, Vol. 14, Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, AD 425-600* (Cambridge, 2001).

the protagonist and whose action is described by the Gibbonian trajectory of decline and fall.

This narrative commences more or less *in medias res* with the usurpation of Diocletian, whom ancient commentators accused of altering the character of the imperial office by introducing “Persian” ceremonial and who to that extent used to be credited with transforming a “principate” into a “dominate.” It points to Justinian’s death as the moment at which some crucially defining animus of Greco-Roman antiquity likewise expired, even if its last gasps persisted into the seventh century.

M’s manner of constructing his subject matter aligns him with what James O’Donnell has called “the Counter-Reformation in late antique studies,”² a swinging of critical focus back upon the Roman post-mortem and away from the multipolar, multicultural, and open-ended “world of late antiquity” conjured up by Peter Brown’s celebrated 1971 book of that title.³ There is correspondingly greater emphasis upon military and political and—reflecting the significant progress made in this area in the past decade—economic history than upon social and cultural history. Emperors and bishops, rather than local warlords and wonder-workers, occupy the spotlight.

While M prefers to describe change in terms of accommodation and transformation instead of corruption and capitulation and distinguishes with great care and sensitivity the various experiences of the post-imperial West and the proto-Byzantine East, ultimately his account is about catastrophe as opposed to continuity. Yet so far as the events of the distant past are concerned the work avoids polemic and sensationalism and, as befits an installment in a multivolume series marketed for classroom adoption, maintains an evenness of tone that is less opinionated, and therefore less colorful, than the recent catastrophist accounts of Peter Heather and Bryan Ward Perkins.⁴

² J. J. O’Donnell, review of Heather and Ward-Perkins (note 4 below), *BMCR* 2005.07.69. See also the substantial review article by A. Gillett, “Rome’s Fall and Europe’s Rise: A View from Late Antiquity,” *The Medieval Review* 07.10.12.

³ P. R. L. Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity: From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad* (London, 1971); as M points out (7), Brown is himself a contributor to *CAH* vols. 13 and 14 (see n. 1 above).

⁴ P. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History* (Oxford, 2005); B. Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford, 2005).

Where events of the more recent past are concerned it is quite a different matter. In the first of twelve chapters, M provides an introduction that accounts for the success of the Roman empire in terms of “an evolving mastery of the arts of hegemonic rule” (3) and anticipates the diverging fortunes of its western and eastern parts. He justifies his preference for the ‘later Roman’ over the ‘late antique’ perspective on the grounds that the structures of the Roman state and society lend coherence and comprehensiveness to the accounts of ancient and modern historians no less than those structures conditioned the lived experiences of the ancients themselves. Histories of the *longue durée* or of mentalities, in contrast, embody an approach that “suggests a distinct detachment from the world that we experience” (8).

M points to events such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 9/11 attacks of 2001 not only as evidence of the ways in which sudden developments can affect public attitudes and effect geopolitical realignments but also as an illustration of how the present and the past can illuminate one another: “the events through which we have lived in the last twenty years cast a strong light back on later Roman history.... [That history] holds up a mirror to the world we live in today. Through our contemporary experience we are better able to appreciate and learn from the past” (9).

The possibility that what M has predominantly in mind here is an analogy between, on one hand, the death struggle of the eastern Roman and Sasanian empires in the seventh century and the consolidation and expansion of the Islamic caliphate and, on the other, the collapse of the Cold War order and the emergence of Al-Qaida and other radical Islamist movements is substantiated in his final chapter (“The Final Reckoning of the Eastern Empire”), which concludes with a substantial quotation from the *Doctrina Iacobi nuper baptizati*, a seventh-century anti-Jewish polemic that contains the earliest Byzantine reference to Muhammad.⁵ This work identifies a certain Abraham, the brother of a Jewish refugee from Palestine, as the source of a report discrediting the prophet to whom Arab victories over the Romans have been attributed: “So I, Abraham, enquired and heard from those who had met him that there was no truth to be found in the so-called prophet, only the shedding of men’s blood. He says also that he has the keys of paradise, which is incredible” (*Doctr. Iac.* V.16, 209, trans. Hoyland, quoted by M at 422).

⁵ W. E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge, 1995) 211-212.

M's concluding remark strikes what this reviewer found for a number of reasons to be a dismaying note, and compromises an otherwise useful work: "the message and warning of Abraham seem as urgent and relevant in the contemporary world as they were when they were written in the seventh century" (loc. cit.).

There are several grounds for concern here. At a minimum the author owes it to his readers to be as explicit as possible about that in which he believes the contemporary relevance, and thus the basis of his endorsement, of this quotation to consist. Inasmuch as some of the extremists against whom M seems to be reacting are reportedly motivated by inscribing their present struggle upon earlier conflicts and especially by their own dreams of restoring the caliphate, it might be better still to recognize this kind of historical reasoning by analogy as more suited to the purposes of ideologues than students of the past.

A more edifying illustration and justification of M's neo-Gibbonian approach might have emerged out of sustained and critical engagement with work of an avowedly revisionist (or, within O'Donnell's schematization, «Protestant») agenda. Garth Fowden's *From Empire to Commonwealth*, to cite one example,⁶ takes the interstices of the Roman and Sasanian spheres of influence as its geopolitical and cultural frame of reference and points to the mobilization of monotheism in support of the universalist claims of hegemonic powers as a phenomenon that characterizes both the later Roman and early Islamic periods. Although M cites this work in the contexts of religion and the Sasanians he passes up the opportunity to rebut its critique of the classical presuppositions of traditional historiography. Similarly, in scanting the significance of the *longue durée* M mentions Braudel's *The Mediterranean in the Age of Philip* (sic, 8) without attempting to get to grips with Horden and Purcell's avowedly Braudellian and directly relevant *The Corrupting Sea*.⁷

As a whole the book is organized in a manner that might resemble Jones' *Later Roman Empire* were one to attempt to compress the latter into a single volume while devoting significantly greater space to the direct quotation of primary sources and considerably expanding the scope of the investigation itself beyond Jones' own focus upon administration. As challenging as this project is, M must contend as well

⁶ G. Fowden, *From Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993).

⁷ P. Horden and N. Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford, 2001).

with the exponential growth of scholarship in the field in the three or so generations after Jones and especially with the contribution of archaeology to the differentiation and particularization of individual communities and ecologies throughout the ancient world.

M's second chapter, on sources and evidence, foregrounds the intention stated in the preface, "to let the primary evidence and contemporary witnesses speak for themselves" (xiv). This permits his admiration for the classicizing historians—above all for Ammianus, for the fragmentary fifth-century trio of Olympiodorus, Priscus, and Malchus, and for Procopius, all of whom M believes to be "victims of the preference for the late antiquity...approach" (7) and by whom "we are well served" (19)—to shine through. At the same time M feels obliged to begin this chapter with a warning to his reader about "the problem of Christian sources" (14), chiefly on the grounds that they reflect the perspectives and preoccupations of their authors, which are apt to be accorded greater prominence than perhaps they deserve owing to the fact that they have survived and others have not. While warnings about the limitations of sources are salutary, and the distortions introduced both by accidents of survival and by active campaigns of suppression carried out by sectarians against their opponents ought to be pointed out, M's confidence that one group of sources can be trusted to speak for themselves while another needs to be problematized suggests a lack of critical distance. (Compare however the caution with which the sources for the accession of Diocletian are treated on pp. 47-49.)

Chapters Three and Four are chronologically organized accounts, respectively, of the period from the accession of Diocletian to Alaric's sack of Rome (284-410 CE) and from the accession of Theodosius II to Justinian's capture of Ravenna (408-540 CE). The following six chapters are thematic treatments of politics and ideology (chap. 5); the northern barbarians and the Rhine-Danube frontier (6); religious practices and experiences (7); the intersection of politics and personal belief as represented by the conversion experiences of Constantine, Julian, and Augustine, the establishment of orthodoxy within the empire, and the identification of the empire with orthodoxy (8); economics, trade, and taxes (9); and cities and provinces (10). The chronological account resumes in Chapter Eleven, which begins with the great plague of 542 and renewed hostilities with Persia and concludes with Maurice's restoration of Khusro II (misidentified as Khusro I on p. 371) in 591. This chapter also contains M's only sustained discussion of the

Sasanians. Chapter Twelve carries the story down to the deaths of Heraclius in 641 and of the last Sasanian monarch, Yazdgird III, in 651.

It is unfortunate that too much of the limited space for this review has been claimed by the need to address controversies that might have been minimized or avoided altogether. By and large the substantive content of the work is capably handled. M does a respectable job of incorporating and organizing a large and recalcitrant mass of material. There is inevitable overlap between the chronological and thematic chapters, especially where northern barbarians and ecclesiastical controversies are concerned, but reasonable efforts are made to provide cross-references and to orient the reader within the plan of the work as a whole.

At the same time, there are a number of places where the general reader and the undergraduate would benefit from some tightening-up and better signposting throughout the presentation. For example, a reader mystified by the identification of the Alans as “an Arian race from north of the Caucasus” (83) might be excused for—but hardly enlightened by—imagining that this must be a misprint for “Aryan” (especially as we go on to learn, via Ammianus, about their tall stature and yellowish hair).

Again, having been cautioned on p. 286 that “Valens has the reputation of being an Arian emperor...but this is an exaggerated view,” she may wonder what to make of subsequent statements citing (and evidently paraphrasing) Socrates and Theodoret to the effect “that the Goths firmly took on Arian theological doctrines, concordant with those of the emperor Valens” (288) but then averring “the fact that the Goths henceforth adhered to the Arian belief of the emperor Valens” (289).

Inevitably there will be much about which one can argue and quibble in a work of this scope. Where M succeeds most admirably is in conveying throughout the work a clear sense of the empire as a system—both an economic and administrative system capable of extracting and concentrating resources and developing networks of communication that allowed frontiers to be maintained and mechanisms of reciprocity to operate on an unprecedented scale and a political and ideological system that secured the compliance of its subjects and exercised a centripetal attraction upon those at its periphery.

M’s perspective is nuanced enough to recognize both continuity and change and subtle enough to eschew oversimplification and manufactured turning-points. In place of Diocletian’s conversion of a principate into a dominate, we read that

Formal public ceremonies were an important ingredient of imperial power. The Latin historians noted that Diocletian increased the distance between the emperor and his subjects by requiring them to prostrate themselves in his presence. Modern commentators have sometimes interpreted this as a move to Orientalize the monarchy. This habit at the imperial court can be traced back to the Severan period, but it is evident that under the tetrarchs such practices evolved into a much stricter court ceremonial, which deliberately increased the literal and metaphorical distance between the rulers and their subjects (55; references omitted).

There is more to be said about Diocletian's motives in seeking to distance himself from his subjects, about the motives of the historians (Greek as well as Latin) in stigmatizing Diocletian as a ceremonial innovator, and about the motives of modern commentators in sometimes calling these developments orientalizing, but this is a step in the right direction.

Perhaps the best single chapter in the book is its sixth, in which M adroitly navigates the swirling debates on identity and ethnicity (the subject of the 2000 volume he co-edited with Geoffrey Greatrex⁸) at the northern frontier, persuasively analyses the shifting and ambivalent motives of the various groups settled within the former limits of the empire, and fully airs (while respectfully disagreeing with) Walter Goffart's thesis, restated too recently to have been included here,⁹ about the basis upon which that settlement was carried out.

One hopes that there will be an opportunity for the revision of this work and that the passage of time will both encourage a more tolerant oecumenicalism between neo-Gibbonians and Brownians and lend greater perspective on the parallels M perceives between the seventh century and the early twenty-first.

⁸ S. Mitchell and G. Greatrex, *Ethnicity and Culture in Late Antiquity* (Wales and London, 2000).

⁹ W. Goffart, *Barbarian Tides; The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire* (Philadelphia, 2006).