

David S. Potter, *The Roman Empire at Bay, AD 180-395*. Second Edition. *Routledge History of the Ancient World*. London; New York: Routledge, 2014. Pp. xxiv, 767. ISBN 9780415840552. Pbk £28.99.

The appearance of a second edition, ten years after the first, provides an opportunity to revisit an important survey by a leading historian of the Roman Empire. By straddling the division between “principate” and “late” empire, conventionally placed at the accession of Diocletian in 284, Potter encompasses a century either side and avoids commonplace emphasis on “recovery” from “crisis”. He proposes instead a downward trend-line in Roman hegemonic power: “whatever else one may conclude from the pages that follow, the Roman Empire was a less powerful state at the end of the period ... than it was at the beginning” (xiii). Potter has a theory about why this was so, laid out in his Preface with admirable clarity (xiii–xv):

[T]he rise of the court bureaucracy in the early third century was at odds with earlier traditions of decentralization. Decentralized power strengthened the hands of emperors who were able to negotiate between different interest groups, avoiding, if they were successful, excessive dependence on any one class ... The result of the concentration of power in the hands of the court bureaucrats and the leaders of the military bureaucracy was to create a divergence of interest between the emperor and the governing class, whereby the more general interest inherent in the imperial office was subordinated to the parochial interest of imperial officials ... The result was that the administration of the empire as a whole lost direction, and the state as a whole became less powerful.

The argument is unobtrusive and the text wide-ranging — even Braudelian at times, as when Potter describes the Mediterranean environment (10–19). But scattered through this big book, with its dense narrative and rich descriptions, is a series of sign-posts recalling its author’s overall judgment. For Potter, the emperor was both office and person: he “had two bodies, and thus he also had two faces, the one being institutional, the other personal” (61). Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius represent an “ideal ... rarely reached, or even remotely approached, in subsequent centuries” (63). And again: “it is fair to say that the weight of government at the time of Marcus’ death in 180 was still balanced relatively evenly between the emperor’s household and the senate. This will change in the course of the next century, and with it will change the whole system of government” (82). We meet the Emperor Caracalla as the advocate of “a strongly centralizing view of government, whereby the traditional institutions of the state became irrelevant when they did not serve the interests of the emperor himself” (145–6). Early third-century cultural attitudes reflect the slower-moving power of a classical tradition (172–210). But in politics, change was already underway: by 241, the dominance of equestrian officials among the powerful at Rome was already showing through (227–8).

From there, one must tease out a distinctive view of the most volatile stages of the third century: “The increasing disjuncture between the policies of centralization and the realities of diversity would mold the evolution of the Roman state through the next century” (294). To put this another way, the terms on which imperial government weathered the years of crisis (which Potter narrates with great skill) contained the seeds of a gradual ebbing of power.

It is this ebbing of power that provides the central theme in Potter’s handling of the fourth century. Not for him a new imperial heyday. The early fourth century sees “the culmination of the ... transfer of power from the traditional aristocracy of the Antonine age to a new aristocracy that owed its power to positions at court” (380). Increasingly, a man would gain senatorial rank via holding office in the imperial government, rather than the other way around. Precedence in the “order of adoration” (described by Eusebius) radiated outward from the senior members of the court to the wider membership of the senate (381).

What difference did reform of the structures of government make? Potter is candid about the difficulties of judging (380–393). But he makes a point that merits pause: “even if one assumes that there was no actual change in the register of official greed and corruption between the second and fourth centuries, the fact that there was simply more government in the fourth century means that the impact of official corruption was felt more keenly, more of the time” (391–2).

To put the matter in these terms helps to sharpen the problem but it also demands a certain honesty from the reader. One could recast Potter’s formulation on comparable terms by saying that, if there was no change in the rate (so to speak) of corruption, then more government also meant that the *merits* of government were more keenly and consistently felt. Lurking in Potter’s formulation, and its antithesis, is a purely abstract argument about the relative merits of big and small government. What one needs in the present context is a reasonably precise sense of the *impact* of corruption.

This is not straightforward. Practices such as the sale of offices, though they might repulse a modern sensibility, would be meticulously regulated as a legitimate practice to be codified in late Roman law. One need only read Christopher Kelly’s *Ruling the Later Roman Empire* (2004) to see the eastern half of the empire operating in this way in the sixth century. (For comparison, the British Empire relied for almost two centuries on the purchase of army commissions, until its abolition in the Cardwell Reforms of 1871. Imperial decline *followed* that reform.) Money is merely one way to narrow a field of candidates.

It is of course demonstrably true that money was used in ways that were not officially sanctioned by late Roman government, as in the purchase of honorary titles of rank. Instances of this kind were illegal and created local tensions. But if it is “hard to tell” (391) whether the propensity to corruption in the fourth century was greater than in the second, then we need to query whether the ill effects of increased

bureaucracy really outweighed its benefits. Did corruption operate in a disproportionate way – containable by small government but corrosive in a big administration?

Such a scenario is possible. (One thinks of the Soviet Union, hollowed out in part by systemic internal corruption.) But this is not a foregone conclusion and one is conscious of long-term eastern survival. Potter identifies a “Struggle for Control” in the years 355 to 366 but the range of this struggle is even more eastern than western (474–512). Conversely, the western civil war between the brothers Constantine II and Constans is disposed of in a couple of sentences (453) while the conflict between the western usurper Magnentius and Constantius II, in 350–53, could be given more space and clearer sign-posting (461–4). Taken overall, the noticeably greater western propensity to civil war in the late imperial period (and its cumulative effect) might well have been part of a systemic problem, while also furnishing an East-West contrast that could help to account for fifth-century outcomes. It is a dimension oddly underplayed by Potter, who groups the disaster of Adrianople and the civil conflict of the Frigidus together (516–20) as parts of a narrative about the “End of Hegemony” (513–59). But the Eastern Empire recovered from Adrianople whereas the Battle of the Frigidus narrowly preceded the self-defeating *hauteur* shown by the senators of Rome in 408–10.

Potter might be right that there was, at the western end of the Eurasian landmass in 395, an “empire at bay”. Whether it was the whole Roman Empire or one relatively ill-managed half is a question to which one might return with profit.

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