Peter Heather, *Rome Resurgent. War and Empire in the Age of Justinian.* Oxford (Oxford UP) 2018. ISBN 978-0-19-936274-5 / 0199362742. 408 Pages. 7 black-and-white line art, 15 halftones. 22.99 £.

Peter Heather explores two key questions in his latest book: did Justinian pursue an identifiable strategy when he had his armies attack Africa, Italy, and Spain? And did he thus act as a "romantic visionary" (9) who ultimately exhausted the resources of the empire, making him to blame for the disasters of the 7th century, especially the massive territorial losses during the Arabic expansion? Heather takes a clear position at the end of his study: Justinian's actions were not guided by strategic considerations, but rather his military adventures were situational maneuvers, motivated in every instance by domestic politics, that initially proved to be surprisingly successful (contrary to expectations, the small expeditionary force sent to reinstate the legitimate Vandal king Hilderic succeeded in conquering the entire Vandalic kingdom). These successes thus encouraged the emperor to take further, riskier military steps in the West. He thereby put the population of the Empire under immense pressure. In Heather's estimation, furthermore, the destructive and resource-draining wars against the Sasanids in the East must be viewed as the immediate price for this growing spirit of enterprise in the West. The structural neglect of the Balkans, which was repeatedly raided by Bulgars, Kutrigurs, and Slavs, was also supposedly the result of the excessive deployment of troops in Italy.

Despite all this, however, Heather's concludes that there is no evidence of an "overtaxation" of the elites and rural population. On the contrary, the population of the Empire remained loyal to the *Imperium Romanum*. The rise of Islam, in turn, can be traced to other factors that cannot be pinned on Justinian: the outbreak of the plague in 541 and the arrival of the Avars (whom the Lombards escaped by descending on Italy) shifted the general framework of the Empire yet again in an unforeseeable way. It was especially, however, the military disasters connected to the Roman-Persian War of 603–628 that exhausted the resources of the Eastern Roman Empire; not until then can one speak of a real caesura, and not until then was the empire so dramatically weakened as to make Arabic expansion possible: "Justinian's conquest policies generated a great deal of immediate economic loss, combined with huge administrative and political strain within Eastern imperial heartlands. But these were not enough to derail or even fundamentally transform the structures of the Eastern Empire in the sixth century. The real changes that mark the demotion of Constantinople from world to regional power all belong to the seventh century, following the high drama of Persian and Arab Islamic conquest" (311).

These pointed conclusions are the result of a rigorous analysis of the "Age of Justinian." Heather frames his study with excurses into the 5th and 7th centuries, embedding it organically in the history of the Roman Empire while always focusing on the wars in Africa, Italy, Mesopotamia, Armenia, and the Caucasus: "this is fundamentally a book about the wars of Justinian" (10).

In the first chapter, Heather shows how Justinian still saw himself as enmeshed in "the overwhelming ideological imperative" (30) that had determined the actions of Roman emperors since the time of Augustus. In Heather's view, the ideal and ambition of permanent victory put the ruler under significant pressure. He then gives a customary overview of the economic, administrative, and military bases of the Later Roman Empire in Chapter Two. Heather's emphasis on the immense economic power that the *Imperium Romanum* possessed in the 4th century is important not only for his subsequent analysis, but also for his discussion of the evolution of the Roman army and Roman military tactics. The transition to smaller, mobile units and the rise of heavy cavalry in response to Sasanid pressure in the 3rd century and the Huns in the 4th/5th were key advances and adaptations that flowed into the eastern Roman army of the 6th century, the composition and tactics of which proved superior both to the Vandals (who still followed the tactical principles of the 5th century) and to the Ostrogoths.

In the third chapter, Heather discusses the reign of Anastasius (with an excursus into the reign of Zeno). Anastasius showed his competence especially in the area of the administration but ultimately succumbed to religious discord and the unresolved question of the succession.

In the fourth chapter, Heather turns to the reign of Justinian. A programmatic campaign of expansion in the West, according to his theory, can first be observed after the *Nika* Revolt (532) and the conquest of North Africa, after the emperor had previously expressed his claim to be the elect of God in the form of the completion of the *Codex Justinianus*: "In reality, the policy of western expansion emerged only slowly and in highly contingent – that is to say – *unpredictable* – circumstances" (116). The fifth chapter reaches back far into the past, tracing the history of the Vandals from their crossing of the Rhine in 406 to the 6th century and making some interesting points along the way – for instance, with respect to the problem of categorizing the Vandal confederation and its composition. I think that Heather is right in arguing that the conquest of the Vandalic kingdom came as a complete surprise to Justinian (142); according his theory, it was possible only because Belisarius succeeded in landing the Roman expeditionary force intact on the African coast (144) and because the Vandals could not match the tactical skill of the eastern Roman army in the ensuing battles (146). Victory over the Vandals made Justinian's regime "untouchable" (147), as Heather lays out in the sixth chapter. The emperor now could turn his attention to the Ostrogoths, but an expedition to Italy initially proved to be perilous; accordingly, Justinian at first did not intend to carry out a war of conquest, but merely sought to force Theodahad to abdicate (153). Military conflict did not commence until ensuing diplomatic efforts had failed. Heather then traces the events down to Belisarius' arrival in Ravenna in 540.

The seventh chapter then turns our attention back to the East, as Heather's book stands out for tightly interweaving international political enterprises and domestic political developments. The surprise victory in North Africa not only prompted the compilation of the *Digest*, but also opened up new avenues for the emperor's self-

representation, illustrated not least by the Hagia Sophia. Its extraordinarily swift construction (532–537) would have been impossible without Justinian's successes in Africa. Wolfram Brandes, however, has recently shown that this building may have been financed less by Vandal treasure (195) than by the property of the senators who had been executed or exiled after the Nika Revolt.[1] Heather's remarks on the intensification of the "Christianization of the Roman culture of empire" under Justinian are important (200). This intensification, discussed among scholars generally under the label of "liturgification," cannot have emerged as early as the 530s, but rather seems to have become a lasting factor only in the 540s, especially in the context of the major disasters that commenced at that time, which Heather mentions only in passing (201).[2]

The fact that Chosroes' massive attack in 540 should be interpreted as a direct consequence of Justinian's undertakings in the West is the central argument of chapter eight. Heather does not go into the miracles that saved Sergiopolis and Edessa, which he might have introduced in support of his suggestion that religiosity intensified during this period. Rather, Heather stresses that every attempt to calculate the cost of the wars in the West has to take into account the two decades of warfare in the East (as they soon shifted from Mesopotamia and Syria to the Caucasus) and the immense burdens that resulted from them (234), which lasted until the conclusion of the Fifty Years' Peace in 562. The apparent successes in Africa and Italy in 534 and 540 also generated high costs, as Heather illustrates in chapter nine, which describes the resource-consuming efforts by which Justinian at last brought both territories under his control after revolts (Africa) and the renewed outbreak of war (Italy).

Heather delivers a sobering verdict on Justinian in chapter 10: "Historians have sometimes approached Justinian as one of history's great romantics, desperate to return the Roman Empire to its glorious apogee. The reality is more prosaic. Western expansion began as a desperate gamble to save Justinian's imperial skin, only slowly evolving into an actual policy when the degree of immediate battlefield advantage enjoyed by the new model East Roman field army of the sixth century became clear. All the many thousands of human beings who died, as these processes unfolded, were killed to satisfy the short-term political agendas of an autocratic ruler who cared not one jot for the fate of anybody outside his immediate circle" (271). A brief section concerns Justinian's neglect of the Balkan ("Justinian did not callously ignore his Balkan subjects, but he did make them a lower priority than his expansionary wars of conquest, which drew field forces away from their defence and left them more vulnerable," 283), before the author delivers a general assessment with respect to the conquered territories. Here his verdict is split: although the endeavors in Spain can hardly have brought the Empire notable benefits, the conquest of North Africa was worth the effort economically; southern Italy also will have brought the empire

[1] W. Brandes, 'Der *Nika*-Aufstand, Senatorenfamilien und Justinians Bauprogramm', in: M. Meier and S. Patzold (eds.), *Chlodwigs Welt. Organisation von Herrschaft um 500*, Stuttgart 2014, 239–265.

[2] Cf. M. Meier, 'Sind wir nicht alle heilig? Zum Konzept des „Heiligen" (*sacrum*) in spätjustinianischer Zeit', in: *Millennium* 1 (2004) 133–164.

significant income, in contrast to the northern regions, which were lost anyway to the Lombards in the 560s and 570s – irretrievably for the most part.

The major questions addressed in the book are then answered in chapter eleven as sketched above.

Heather's book is well written and fits organically alongside recent research on Justinian that presents a significantly more critical view of this emperor than scholars did prior to the end of the 20th century. Heather offers some highlights in his attempt to interpret the presumed restoration program of Justinian as the product of a long-term development characterized by situational experiences and demands – a theory that I consider both tenable and well-founded. Heather's explanation of Justinian's military successes against both the Vandals and the Goths as the result of the Eastern Roman army's tactical and organizational superiority is an approach that is worth further consideration in my view. That Justinian's policy of conquest in the 6th century cannot be blamed for the Arabic expansion of the 7th century – because it supposedly exhausted the resources of the Empire – also seems obvious to me in light of Heather's analysis. That said, there remain differences with respect to the assessment of the role of the Balkan: Alexander Sarantis has clearly demonstrated that Justinian by no means neglected the Balkan or treated it as a second-tier territory; on the contrary, Justinian made significant diplomatic efforts, constructed fortifications, and invested considerably more troops in securing the Balkan than in the war in Italy.[3] Religion as a factor – especially with respect to the second part of Justinian's reign, which Heather discusses only cursorily – could have been given greater weight, particularly since religion acquired guiding force to an every greater degree.[4] That in no way, however, changes the fact that Heather has published a commendable treatment of the "Age of Justinian" in this new book, which yet again formulates pointed theories that will generate discussion for years to come.

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[3] A. Sarantis, *Justinian's Balkan Wars. Campaigning, Diplomacy and Development in Illyricum, Thrace and the Northern World A.D. 527–65*, Leeds 2016.

[4] Cf. H. Leppin, *Justinian. Das christliche Experiment*, Stuttgart 2011.