

**Peter Heather, *Rome Resurgent: War and Empire in the Age of Justinian*.** Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. vii, 393. \$29.95. ISBN: 9780199362745.

We seem to be entering the golden age of Justinianic military history, and as a student of war and historiography in the age of Justinian it is hard not to be excited by all the great work recently published. Amidst the flurry of book chapters, journal articles, and books, comes Peter Heather's *Rome Resurgent*; ostensibly aimed at a general audience, it offers an introduction to Justinian's wars and their impact on more recent and later history. Heather's purpose is to address two important questions about Justinian's wars: did Justinian plan his conquests of Africa and Italy from the start, and did Justinian overstretch the empire's resources? Despite the seeming narrow focus, Heather ranges widely in eleven chapters that provide useful overviews, and which often provide much food for thought. In this review, I will keep the summary to a minimum, for Meier's review has already appeared in this journal (*AHB Online Reviews* 8 [2018] 117–120); rather, I will focus on a handful of issues that he did not cover.

The first four chapters provide the background to Justinian's reign, the sources, and war-making in the sixth century. Chapter One focuses on the nature of imperial rule, especially its religious and military dimensions. In the second chapter, Heather turns to the military-fiscal complex; he provides some background to the military and the financing and organization for war. Next, he considers regime change and the immediate political background to Justinian's reign, focusing on the process of how a late Roman emperor ascended to the throne and what was involved in securing the top position, emperor. The last background chapter (Chapter Four) examines some of Justinian's desperate measures to shore up his position in the wake of the Nika riots.

Most of the rest of the book provides a narrative of the regime's major conflicts starting with the western wars of conquest, those in Africa and Italy, discussion of which is dispersed over a few chapters. The extensive narrative is sprinkled with digressions on relevant themes, some which Heather knows a great deal about, like client kingdoms, borderlands, and migrations. Heather also considers the various reasons why the wars changed over time, a discussion which turns to Rome's mixed results against Persia, especially with respect to Antioch – and Heather's description is particularly evocative. Overall, Heather gives the impression that there was not a lot of success in the east due to insufficient military preparedness, amongst other things. The ninth chapter, entitled "Insurgents", does what it looks like it does: after the initial, rapid successes, in Africa, and to a lesser extent in Italy (though not without a few more hiccups along the way), Heather here turns to the many years of insurgency, with the Berbers in Africa, and the re-formulated Gothic army in Italy.

Heather makes it quite clear that the Berbers were a very different political entity from the previous Vandal rulers.<sup>1</sup>

The last two chapters, two of the most interesting and thought-provoking, are where Heather returns to those two questions noted at the start of this review. In both cases, Heather answers in the negative. For Heather, Justinian, like many before him, was a warrior emperor who needed military success to prove his legitimacy. That said, Heather's suggestion that Justinian's motives for going to war in the west were political is very attractive, especially the notion that Justinian looked westward, as opportunity arose, in a bid to improve his credentials to the elites and strengthen his control over the state in the wake of the Nika Riots and even of his stumbling assumption of the throne. With respect to the question of the impact of this expansionist policy on the empire's resources, Heather discusses whether Justinian's wars had a toxic impact not only on contemporaries, especially in Italy and Africa, but also in the seventh century, when the empire was embroiled in bitter conflict first with Persia, and then the armies from Arabia. In Heather's eyes, the bulk of the blame should rest not on Justinian but on those later sixth century rulers, especially Justin II and Maurice, who, it is argued, were responsible for generating a world war; indeed, Justin deserves particular censure for bringing the Turks into the picture. This brings the book to a close.

As I noted at the start, *Rome Resurgent* provides a good, well written, overview of Justinian's wars with plenty of background, which is especially useful for those new to the subject, as many readers likely will be. Yet, the bibliography can be a bit light, which in turn, and at times, has some bearing on his use of the evidence. A case in point is Heather's use of Agathias. Averil Cameron's pioneering book on Agathias appears in the bibliography,<sup>2</sup> while Anthony Kaldellis' more recent articles,<sup>3</sup> and even Brodka's book are absent.<sup>4</sup> As a result, his treatment of Agathias is uneven, which contrasts sharply with Heather's use of Procopius. Early on, Heather calls out Agathias' language and his hyperbolic figures, while affording him considerable credit for the reliability of his narrative (p. 10). Yet, when discussing Narses' efforts in Italy, he seems to accept at face value Agathias' reference to the 18,000 soldiers at Narses' command and 30,000 under Butilinus (p. 288). Heather, and Agathias, might well be right, but that little bit of inconsistency, at the very least, might raise an eyebrow or two.

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<sup>1</sup> The Balkans are covered cursorily, and much of what Heather says has been contradicted decisively by Sarantis (*Justinian's Balkan Wars*, Francis Cairns, 2016), whose book might have appeared too late to be considered.

<sup>2</sup> *Agathias*, 1970, Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Kaldellis, "Agathias on History and Poetry," *GRBS* 38 (1997): 295–305; "The Historical and Religious Views of Agathias: a Reinterpretation," *Byzantion* 69 (1999): 206–252; "Things are not what they seem: Agathias Mythistoricus and the Last Laugh of Classical Culture," *CQ* 53 (2003): 295–300.

<sup>4</sup> *Die Geschichtsphilosophie in der spätantiken Historiographie*, P. Lang, 2004.

Heather also makes a number of thought-provoking arguments. Here I want to focus on two of them, one a central focus of the book, the other a peripheral, though no less important, issue. The first is Heather's characterization of Justinian's war-making policies as reactionary. This view of Justinian's policies has a lot in common with Fergus Millar's characterization of earlier Roman emperors, whom Millar argued spent a significant amount of their time responding to the petitions of their subjects. Heather's Justinian stumbles during his first few years as emperor and is nearly overthrown. For Heather, many of his later actions, not only those on the field of battle, should be understood as responses to the problems he faces: like Millar's petition responses, only on a grander scale.

Not everyone, however, sees Justinian as reactionary. Some years ago, Geoffrey Greatrex made a compelling case for clear, identifiable Roman strategic thinking in late antiquity.<sup>5</sup> Even more recently, Clemens Koehn<sup>6</sup> has argued that Justinian made significant and well thought out military reforms right at the start of his reign, including the addition of an Armenian command (*magister militum per Armeniam*), which is reflected in, among other things, the very language Justinian uses at the start of the *Codex of Justinian*.<sup>7</sup> While evidence like this may not prove unequivocally that there was any sort of grand, strategic plan, it does at least point towards some awareness on Justinian's part, from an early stage, of the military challenges the empire faced. That Justinian ruled for forty years must also be borne in mind: could he really have ruled as long as he did on luck alone and without some planning?

The second point is Heather's suggestion that there was a military revolution in late antiquity that enabled the Romans not only to survive the turmoil of the third through fifth centuries, but also to succeed, at least in the east, and all thanks to their encounters first with the Persians, then the Huns. This revolution entailed moving more men to the eastern frontier in response to the Persians, and improving the integration of cavalry and making more use of mounted archery in combat in light of Rome's experiences with the Huns. The term "military revolution" is not one usually associated with the late Roman military, or the Roman military of any age. Rather, military revolutions are usually seen in the context of the rising European powers in the early modern era, as argued in the influential work of Michael Roberts and later Geoffrey Parker. Since then, the notion of an early modern European military revolution has been widely accepted, though not without some modifications. In fact, by some measures it has been so successful that the notion of a "military revolution", often styled a "revolution in military affairs" or RMA, has been applied to other contexts, like tenth century (AD) France and fourth century (BC) Macedon. These

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<sup>5</sup> Greatrex, G. 2007. "Roman frontiers and foreign policy in the East", in *Aspects of the Roman East*, edited by R. Alston and S. Lieu, 103–173. Turnhout: Brepols.

<sup>6</sup> Koehn, C, *Justinian und die Armee des frühen Byzanz*, de Gruyter, 2018. This book appeared after Heather's.

<sup>7</sup> *Cod. Iust. pr. Summa rei publicae tuition de stirpe duarum rerum armorum, atque legum*/the supreme safeguard of the State, stemming from two sources, (namely) arms and laws.

other revolutions have varied in chronological scope, with some shorter, others longer, and the hundred or so years (between 1560 and 1660) initially associated with the early modern European revolution falling somewhere in the middle.

However, not everyone accepts that there was an early modern RMA, let alone any other such military revolutions. Even some of those whose research has focused specifically on war in the age of Justinian (the sixth century) have seen it not as a period of evolution, revolution, or great transformation, but rather as a period of continuity. The first documented sign of Roman heavy cavalry dates to at least the reign of Antoninus Pius, when the *ala I Pannoniorum et Gallorum*, based in Moesia Inferior, appears with the epithet *catafracta* on an inscription (*CIL* 11.5632). Mounted auxiliary units appear at least as early as Caracalla. As for shifting soldiers to the east, and even the general expansion in size to a larger military, this too had been going on for a long time. The Romans were in the business of making significant changes in troop deployment for most of the imperial era, and the shift to the east started as early as the first century (AD/CE) and the campaigns of Corbulo. Even the number of troops at Rome's disposal had been slowly increasing since Augustus' professionalization of the armed forces. Ultimately, these two changes seem less like major revolutions in Roman war making, and more the inevitable consequence of many small changes over a long period of time. Taking the long view then, what stands out is Rome's long standing, consistent adaptability in the face of military adversity, evidence for which we find as far back as the First Punic War and the construction of their first fleet in the face of Carthaginian naval supremacy.

This review has only skimmed the surface of what is, in the end, a provocative and engaging account of the age of Justinian. While readers may not agree with all of Heather's arguments, and a reader might well wish that the bibliography had been fleshed out a little more, Heather has provided plenty of food for thought. All in all, Heather has provided what will undoubtedly become the standard introduction to the subject, and the springboard to future work on war in the age of Justinian.

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