

M. Kulikowski, *The Tragedy of Empire. From Constantine to the Destruction of Roman Italy*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 2019. Pp.382 + xxx.

Just three years after his initial volume, *The Triumph of Empire. The Roman World from Hadrian to Constantine*, Kulikowski has produced a lucid and well-written follow-up. Like its predecessor, the book is very well produced, lavishly equipped with maps and colour plates, not to mention a good index and an up-to-date bibliography (preceded by helpful analysis of recent work on the periods covered).

That said, this is a hard book to review, since it is aimed, of course, not at a specialist readership but rather the general public – among whom there is a healthy appetite for accounts of Late Antiquity. Kulikowski is a sure guide to the field, having published widely, and never hesitates to set forth his opinion on contested issues (such as barbarian identity, e.g., p.260). Given that the work has neither footnotes nor endnotes, it is hard for students to engage with it, but it is worth raising a few issues here. For beginners in the field, it is not entirely clear whether this book will replace those by Stephen Mitchell, *A History of the Late Roman Empire*² (Oxford, 2015), Hugh Elton, *The Roman Empire in Late Antiquity. A Political and Military History* (Oxford, 2018), or indeed by Averil Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity, AD 395-700*² (Abingdon, 2012), all of which have perhaps more to offer the student (as opposed to the general reader). On the other hand, it can more than hold its own in comparison to Peter Heather's *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (London, 2005), is undoubtedly superior to the idiosyncratic *The Ruin of the Roman Empire. A New History* by James J. O'Donnell (New York, 2008), and is certainly the equal of Adrian Goldsworthy's *The Fall of the West. The Death of the Roman Superpower* (London, 2009), which covers the same period as both Kulikowski's volumes.

The book offers a narrative account of the demise of the western empire and the contrasting fate of its eastern half down to the sixth century. Kulikowski presents a quite detailed and engaging narrative, which is particularly strong in its analysis of events in the western empire and how gradually the state contracted to oblivion. While the starting point of the work is clear, viz. the reign of Julian, although ch.1 returns to discuss the tetrarchy and Constantine's dynasty, its terminus is not. The subtitle mentions 'the destruction of Roman Italy'; at p.313, at the end of the book, the author presents a stark assessment of the state of the Italian peninsula in the wake of Justinian's reconquest, which implies that this is the date alluded to. One has the feeling, however, that already by the late fifth century – the traditional date for the fall of the West – the narrative is running out of steam. The final two chapters in particular, one on the East, one on the West, are less driven by narrative, instead setting forth the new world that emerged from the remains of the western empire and the rather different – as Kulikowski portrays it – empire, which he calls Byzantine, that ruled the East. This is not a significant criticism, it must be said, since there are,

after all, excellent treatments of this following period, most notably Peter Sarris' *Empires of Faith. The Fall of Rome to the Rise of Islam, 500-700* (Oxford, 2011), one of the best accessible accounts of 'late' Late Antiquity.

A general problem with books such as the present one is the tendency to overstate things, to exaggerate the importance of certain events or phenomena; this phenomenon may be observed, e.g., in Kyle Harper's *The Fate of Rome. Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire* (Princeton, 2017), for which it has (rightly) attracted criticism. Thus Kulikowski opines trenchantly that 'it is impossible to exaggerate the scale of the Persian success and the Roman disaster' (p.33) in his assessment of Julian's Persian expedition and Jovian's territorial concessions to Shapur II. In fact, however, the deal then concluded ushered in an unparalleled period of peace between the two empires and merely reversed the remarkable gains that had been made by Galerius and Diocletian at Narses' expense in 298/9. The fall of Nisibis, while a disgrace for the Romans, to be sure, was thus by no means a significant blow in the long term. Is it really the case that 'the only species as mobile as humans are the rats and dogs that accompany us everywhere, and the parasites that live in and on us' (p.76)? We are in Harper's territory here, where hyperbole seems *de mise*. But in fact migrating birds and whales, for instance, surely traverse even greater distances. That said, Kulikowski's treatment of steppe mobility (pp.72-8) is laudable and lucid, drawing on recent studies and complementing his good coverage of the region in ch.8 of his *Triumph of Empire*.

On the other hand, although the volume mostly comprises a sturdy narrative of the period, Kulikowski is able to draw out certain consistent themes, e.g. in the emergence of regional factions and the fissuring of relations between the Gallic and Italian aristocracies over the fifth century (pp.118-19, 154, 198-200). He also pauses to consider in greater detail significant figures of the period, e.g. Sts Ambrose, Martin and Augustine (pp.114-15). His analysis that the Christian identity of the late empire brought a host of problems with it, as emperors grappled with the need to enforce orthodoxy, is sound (p.23). His remarks on the abundance of gold from the period (p.54) are very interesting, bringing to bear recent research of Roman *solidi*. Kulikowski's discussion of rivalries between military men and the Italian aristocracy under Valentinian (p.63) is useful. He is right to take issue with simplistic interpretations of Roman and German identity and how this is sometimes used to portray power struggles (e.g. pp.133, 270). His assessment of the dissolution of the West is also persuasive, emphasising its almost accidental nature (p.195); gradually warlords replaced official commanders (p.221), while many aristocrats threw in their lot with the newly arrived peoples (pp.223-4). He sensibly underlines the fundamental stability of the eastern court during this time, although its ability to fend off military men had surely much to do with the Theodosian walls, as R. Pfeilschifter demonstrates in his excellent work, *Der Kaiser und Konstantinopel* (Berlin, 2013). He gives short shrift to notions of 'ethnic essentialism' and facile notions of a sudden violent barbarian overthrow of the western empire, rebutting views that still retain

some adherents (pp.260-1, cf. p.270 for his scepticism on the ‘dichotomous binary of Roman and barbarian’ of the sources); he also draws attention (p.262) to the interesting small bronze plaques issued by urban prefects at Rome in the fifth century, less well-known than the ivory diptychs, which were the focus of a detailed study on his part in *Journal of Late Antiquity* 10 (2017), 3-41.

On some details, as might be expected in a book that covers so much ground, there are points on which one might disagree. While it is good to make use of the Armenian *Epic Histories* (p.82), it is surprising to find them attributed to a (non-existent) Faustus of Byzantium: it has long been established that this is a misreading of their Armenian title, *Buzandaran Patmut’iwnk’*, as emerges clearly from Nina Garsoïan’s introduction to her translation of the work (1989). Whether the Romans and Persians really agreed to share the costs of defending the passes across the Caucasus (p.129, cf. 171, 236-7) is highly doubtful, as Roger Blockley has shown, e.g. in *East Roman Foreign Policy* (Leeds, 1992), 50-1. Kulikowski does not hesitate to portray Theodosius II as a cipher: ‘From the week of his birth to the day of his death, most of Theodosius’ decisions were made for him by someone else’ (p.156). Others, however, have argued quite convincingly for a more active role on the part of the emperor: see Hugh Elton, ‘Imperial Politics at the Court of Theodosius II’ in A. Cain and N. Lenski, eds, *The Power of Religion in Late Antiquity* (Farnham, 2009), 133-42.

The contrast put forward at p.172 between Rome and Persia is curious: Kulikowski argues that for the Romans, Persia always remained ‘its chief adversary right until it ceased to exist’, while the Sasanians regarded the two powers as ‘two eyes of the world’, united against the forces emerging from the steppe. But the formula ‘two eyes of the world’ comes from a Roman source, of course, Peter the Patrician, even if he attributes it to the Persian king Narses (frg.13 = 201 in T. Banchich, *The Lost History of Peter the Patrician* [Abingdon, 2015]). Many Roman authors, including Procopius and the anonymous author of the *De Scientia Politica*, were positive in their assessment of the Persians, even if traditional Roman rhetoric continued to depict them as eternal foes. The Roman Emperor Maurice (582-602), whose reign falls beyond the remit of this book, presumably adopted a more positive stance, given that he chose to restore Khusro II to his throne. Despite this cooperation, it was precisely this king who, far from viewing Rome as an ally, sought to overthrow the entire state in the opening decades of the seventh century in what is now often called ‘the last great war of antiquity’.

Kulikowski’s decision to refer to opponents of Chalcedon consistently (e.g. pp. 189, 245) as ‘Monophysites’ is surprising, although it features also in Mitchell’s book; Elton more wisely opts for ‘anti-Chalcedonians’. The label, as he notes, is a hostile one, but it is also inaccurate: very few anti-Chalcedonians insisted on there being one exclusive nature of Christ. One might place Eutyches, for instance, in this group, as well as the troublesome Akephaloi of Alexandria. Even if modern readers may well, as he notes (p.189), find these theological niceties ‘gobbledygook’, it would nonetheless have been just as easy to refer to these opponents of the council of 451 either as anti-

Chalcedonians or as Miaphysites, as has become the norm over recent years. At p.220 Kulikowski asserts that not only the empress Eudoxia, but also both her daughters Eudocia and Placidia, were released from Vandalic North Africa to Constantinople. While it is clear that Eudoxia and Placidia did indeed depart in 461 or 462, it is hard to see how Eudocia could have done likewise, given that she was betrothed to Gelimer's son Huneric – whom she married soon after this. Only at the end of her life, in the early 470s, does she seem to have left, in this case for Jerusalem, cf. J. Martindale, *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, vol.2 (Cambridge, 1980), s.v. Eudocia 1 with Priscus, frg.38.1.

Kulikowski rightly takes into account important developments on the eastern frontier of the Persian state, where various rivals threatened Sasanian power, notably in the fifth century. He dates the ascendancy of the Hephthalites to as early as the 430s or 440s (p.235), although we know that King Peroz was still struggling with their predecessors, the Kidarites, up to the 460s; by then, no doubt, the Hephthalites were indeed taking their place. He is equally generous in his assessment of Hephthalite power in the sixth century, claiming that they 'had a stable, hegemonic position in the Pamirs, the Hindu Kush and the former Kushanshahr' throughout, although our sources make clear that Khusro I was able to destroy their power, with Turk help, already in the 560s. The useful recent work of K. Rezakhani, *ReOrienting the Sasanians. East Iran in Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh, 2017), ch.6, is relevant on both issues, while M. Jackson Bonner's *The Last Empire of Iran* (Piscataway, NJ, 2020) will offer excellent coverage of the Sasanian empire in general. Kulikowski's placing of Peroz's death at Herat in modern Afghanistan (p.235) is without foundation; it is just as likely to have taken place near Gorgo, to the east of the Caspian Sea, not far from the imposing fortifications that the Sasanians had built to protect themselves here; nor can his first unsuccessful campaign be securely placed in 469 (p.236). His remarks on the build-up of defences and population in the Caucasus at this time, p.237, are interesting and usefully put into a broader context.

The downfall of the usurper Basiliscus in 476 is narrated (pp.245-6) with no mention of Daniel the Stylite, a surprising omission, given the importance of such holy men; nor does his fellow Stylite Symeon (the Elder) feature at any point. Rome's Arab allies, usually now called Jafnids, are instead termed Ghassanids (p.254); so also their adversaries, previously often called Lakhmids, are now generally referred to as Naşrids, cf. (e.g.) G. Fisher, *Between Empires. Arabs, Romans, and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2012), 3-7 with C. Robin, 'Arabia and Ethiopia' in S.F. Johnson, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2012), 294. The preference here, as with the term 'Monophysites', requires some explanation; some scholars, e.g. W. Liebeschuetz, 'Arab Tribesmen and Desert Frontiers in Late Antiquity', *JLA* 8 (2015), 85-9, have indeed argued in favour of the old nomenclature. Evidence is thin for a persecution of Christians in Persia during the war of 502-6 (p.256), still less of a flood of refugees to Syria. The *magister officiorum* Celer retook Amida from the Persians in winter 504-5 (p.257), but hardly 'promptly': unable to seize it by force, he was forced

to agree terms. Nor is it likely that was Kavadh was distracted during this war by a Hephthalite attack (p.257); the 'Huns' to whom Procopius refers are much more likely to have been Sabirs, cf. F. Haarer, *Anastasius I. Politics and Empire in the Late Roman World* (Leeds, 2006), 63. It is surprising to find the *vindices* described as 'in fact simply tax farmers, who bid on contracts to deliver taxes in kind' (p.258), and thus a throwback to earlier times, signalling, Kulikowski claims, a retreat in imperial power. These are questionable conclusions in any case and certainly cannot be supported by the poorly attested institution of the *vindices*. Moreover, what little we do know about them implies merely a supervision of tax collection in the cities of the East, as is clear from A. Laniado, *Recherches sur les notables municipaux dans l'empire protobyzantin* (Paris, 2002), 29-33, cf. W. Brandes, *Finanzverwaltung in Krisenzeiten* (Frankfurt, 2002), 408.

To state, as Kulikowski does, that Theoderic (the Amal) 'imposed a tributary status on the African kingdom' (p.263) in 500 in connection with the marriage of the Vandal king Thrasamund to his sister Amalafrika is perhaps to overstate matters: the discussion of A. Merrills and R. Miles, *The Vandals* (Oxford, 2014), 132-3, is more nuanced. As they note, Procopius, *Wars*, iii.8.13, describes Thrasamund as the most powerful of all the Vandal rulers, in part no doubt because of the troops despatched to his court by the Ostrogoths. In an interesting discussion of the relatively successful Vandal régime, Kulikowski argues that Geiseric, unlike Theoderic or even Attila, 'felt no compulsion to join the imperial government' (p.266). It is true, of course, that he never held nor sought a post as *magister militum*, unlike so many warlords. On the other hand, he undoubtedly tried to tie his family to the Theodosian dynasty, an ambition realised through the betrothal of Huneric and Eudocia and, in the end, through the birth of their son Hilderic; Kulikowski is naturally aware of these dynastic plans, suggesting even that Geiseric encouraged the continuation of the imperial cult in his kingdom because of these links (p.267). In his survey of Vandal rulers (pp.268-9) one might expect to find reference to Geiseric's unusual succession system, whereby the eldest member of the Hasding family succeeded to the throne upon the demise of the king (on which see [e.g.] Merrills and Miles, *The Vandals*, 74); instead, he gives the impression that the king's son would be expected to succeed him. On the same page (p.269, cf. p.300) he claims that King Hilderic was 'brought up in the East', a statement for which there is no support, even if this mild ruler was a Nicene Christian, rather than an Arian, and on good terms with Justin I and Justinian.

Kulikowski takes a downbeat view of Justinian, as indeed of the eastern empire in the sixth century and after, arguing that already by the seventh century it had become 'Byzantine' and quite different from its earlier Roman incarnation(s); in doing so, he rather underestimates both the empire's extent and its remarkable ability to withstand the numerous challenges of that period. Peter Heather's recent book, *Rome Resurgent. War and Empire in the Age of Justinian* (Oxford, 2019), while acknowledging that much of Justinian's foreign policy, notably his western ventures, was largely opportunistic, is more sanguine about their long-term impact on the eastern empire:

he believes that, despite the many losses sustained, enough of the new territories were held for sufficient time to recoup the effort involved (pp.329-30). Kulikowski, on the other hand, concludes that Justinian 'left the empire weaker and poorer than he had found it' (p.311).

Kulikowski's treatment of Vitalian's revolt towards the end of Anastasius' reign (p.296) is problematic: it is far from certain that he was *comes foederatorum* or even actually a general at the time of his uprising. Avshalom Laniado has analysed the episode in detail, 'Jean d'Antioche et les débuts de la révolte de Vitalien' in P. van Nuffelen and P. Blaudeau, eds, *L'historiographie tardo-antique et la transmission des savoirs* (Berlin, 2015), 349-69, and suggested that the removal of the *annona foederaticia* may have applied only to Vitalian personally, who is likely to have been a Gothic soldier, not necessarily of very high rank. In the discussion of the manoeuvrings leading up to the acclamation of Justin I in 518 (p.298) one might have expected to find a mention of the fact that Justinian himself was proposed as a candidate at one point – as indeed was the general Patricius. On the following page he attributes to Justinian the murder of Vitalian in 520, after which he 'took for himself the position of *magister militum praesentalis*'. This overlooks Brian Croke's important article, 'Justinian under Justin: Reconfiguring a Reign', *BZ* 100 (2007), 33 n.118, where he points out that Justinian's promotion preceded Vitalian's murder. In general, Kulikowski adopts the view that Justinian was the dominant force during his uncle's reign, although Croke's article throws at least part of this picture into question.

One might note also a few minor slips, e.g. p.28, for 'Nusabyn' read 'Nusaibyn'. The powerful outer walls of Constantinople are generally termed the 'Theodosian walls', not the 'Anthemian walls' (p.157), even if the latter version is still occasionally found. The name 'Ibas' is surely meant at p.312, rather than 'Ibbas', while a reference to 're-enforcements' (p.307) looks like the clumsy intervention of a copy-editor, gratuitously replacing the obvious 'reinforcements'. The prose style, generally very readable, likewise occasionally throws up some odd expressions, e.g. p.4, 'transshipping', or p.263, 'prospered better'.

Overall, however, Kulikowski has produced a lively and interesting book. The criticisms on points of detail noted above are just that; they do not detract from the value of the volume, which, after all, is aimed at a general public and is likely to attract further enthusiasts for Late Antiquity. In doing so, and in making the field accessible to a broad audience, he deserves our sincere thanks.

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