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Peter Heather. Rome Resurgent: War and Empire in the Age of Justinian.

Matt King

University of Minnesota, matthewking1@usf.edu

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in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Peter Heather. *Rome Resurgent: War and Empire in the Age of Justinian.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 408 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-936274-5.

Reviewed by Matthew King (University of Minnesota)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

In *Rome Resurgent: War and Empire in the Age of Justinian*, Peter Heather paints a compelling picture of the famed ruler Justinian (r. 527-65) that is accessible to a general audience and thought-provoking for specialists of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Heather, whose previous works have focused largely on the Goths and the fall of Rome, turns his gaze east in this book to Constantinople and the Eastern Roman emperor that some have considered to be the *Ultimus Romanorum* (“last of the Romans”). Over the course of eleven chapters, Heather painstakingly uses textual and archaeological sources to narrate the history of Justinian’s conquests and to analyze their consequences. From this research, he argues that Justinian was a product of his time—a ruler who opportunistically sought to expand his domains and (contrary to what many scholars have argued) did not ceaselessly seek to reunify the Roman Empire.

Heather considers this book to be fundamentally “about the wars of Justinian: an attempt to provide narrative and analysis of their causes, course, and consequences” (p. 10). It is this goal that drives the majority of *Rome Resurgent*. Heather sets up the reign of Justinian in the first three chapters by considering the various facets of Roman politics, ideology, and religion that were crucial to his reign. In chapter 1, he outlines how the “prime virtue required of all Roman emperors was victory” (p. 28). In the face of substantial internal and external threats that emperors faced, the single easiest way for them to maintain their rule was through military supremacy. As a result of this reality, as chapter 2 explains, the infrastructure of the Eastern Roman Empire’s government was designed to maintain a fully funded professional army at its core. Justinian inherited these bu-

reaucratic systems, for which military “victory was the acid test of legitimacy” and which he had to successfully navigate and exploit. Chapter 3 turns to the political realities of the late 400s and early 500s, with a particular eye toward how Justin I (r. 518-27) deftly outmaneuvered a host of rival claimants to ensure the succession of his nephew, Justinian.

The next three chapters consider the military policy of Justinian from his coronation in 527 through the conquest of Ravenna in 540. In these chapters, Heather emphasizes how these campaigns were not the result of Justinian’s overarching desire to reform the Roman Empire. Instead, “the western conquest policy turns out to have been not the long-standing plan of a romantic visionary but another type of phenomenon altogether, one much better known to historians: overseas adventurism as the last desperate gamble of a bankrupt regime” (p. 121). Chapter 4 outlines the circumstances that led Justinian to look west, specifically the Nika Riots of 532 and fallout from the expansive legal reforms that Justinian had instituted during the first several years of his reign. It was only in the face of these problems that Justinian looked west, nearly ten years into his reign, by opportunistically invading North Africa and Sicily. Chapter 5 narrates the course of these conquests, made largely by Justinian’s famed general, Belisarius. Heather, drawing on his own background as a scholar of the Goths and Vandals, details the groups the Belisarius fought and concludes that their defeat was due to their possession of inferior military technologies. Chapter 6 then considers Belisarius’s subsequent campaign in Italy, which saw decisive victories for Justinian that included the capture of Rome and Ravenna. With these victories, Justinian’s regime was

“untouchable” (p. 147).

The consequences of Justinian’s conquests were mixed, as Heather explores in the next three chapters. Chapter 7 explores the immediate aftermath of these campaigns, which afforded Justinian the financial and political clout to enact substantial legal reforms and to finance substantial building projects like the Hagia Sophia. Despite the enactment of these projects, though, Justinian was unable to enact a religious policy to unite the various Christian groups that had become increasingly fractured since the Council of Chalcedon a century earlier. These divisions were amplified when Justinian was met with a series of military setbacks. As narrated in chapter 8, the Sassanian ruler Chosroes I (r. 531-79) launched successful campaigns against Eastern Roman lands in the late 530s that were only resolved in 562 after immense financial and humanitarian losses. Chapter 9 turns to the difficulties Justinian faced in governing his newly acquired western territories. Heather details how local groups in North Africa and Italy (Berbers and Goths, respectively) fought against Eastern Roman rule and proved a significant challenge to Justinian. It took almost twenty years after their initial conquests for Roman governors from Constantinople to effectively establish their rule over these troublesome groups.

Chapters 10 and 11 of *Rome Resurgent* consider the long-term consequences of Justinian’s conquests. It is in these chapters that Heather seeks to answer a question that scholars have long asked: were Justinian’s conquests a “poisoned chalice” for his successors, straining the resources of the newly enlarged Eastern Roman Empire such that it was “ripe for collapse” in coming decades (p. 271)? Heather thinks that the answer to this question is, for the most part, no. He shows that, despite the colossal human losses from Justinian’s campaigns, there is sufficient archaeological evidence (particularly in North Africa) to show that these conquests yielded a massive profit for the government in Constantinople. The same is true for southern Italy and, to a lesser extent, northern Italy. To Heather, the blame for the collapse of much of the Eastern Roman Empire falls on shoulders of Justinian’s successors, Justin II and Maurice, whose war-mongering with Persia created the “conditions in which the forces of Islam could conquer the Roman orient” (p. 322). The years of continuous war that Justinian’s successors waged in the Middle East are to blame for the eventual crumbling of the Eastern Roman Empire. Nonetheless, Heather still pins some of the blame for these later wars on Justinian, whose “poisonously successful legacy” inspired later emperors and led to the perpetuation of a

seemingly endless war with Persia (p. 331).

Throughout *Rome Resurgent*, Heather de-romanticizes the actions of Justinian and convincingly shows that he did not dedicate his political career, as some have argued, to the reestablishment of the Roman Empire. Instead, he shows that Justinian was the product of his time. He was an emperor who had to constantly deal with internal and external threats to his rule and who used opportunistic military campaigns to his immediate advantage. Far from having a consistent foreign policy driving his empire, Justinian was driven by “potent mixture of the demands of internal political agendas and immediate opportunism” (p. 323).

Heather uses a host of written and archaeological sources to support his claims. Foremost among the written sources is Procopius, whose works Heather outlines and problematizes throughout the book. Alongside Procopius is the corpus of late antique writings that range from Greek chronicles to Egyptian papyri, which Heather is masterful at synthesizing into a comprehensible narrative. Heather is also adept at incorporating archaeological evidence into his narrative. The incorporation of this evidence is particularly fruitful when Heather evaluates the legacy of Justinian, for it provides some indication of how agricultural laborers fared during and after Justinian’s reign. Although these sources contribute to a well-informed narrative, at times they are under-cited. Heather is light on historiographical citations in particular, which makes it difficult to place this work in specific dialogue with previous scholars.

Heather also does an admirable job of making this complicated narrative approachable for a general audience by making references to the present. Many of these references are humorous and innocuous, such as calling Peter the Patrician the “East Roman 007” (p. 269) or referring to the importance of succession in medieval politics by adapting Bill Clinton’s phrase, “it’s about the succession, stupid” (p. 148). At times, though, these references might distract more than provide insight. For example, Heather compares the casualties of the 532 Nika Riots to those in Syria in the 1980s (p. 111) and compares the technological disadvantage of the Vandals to those of Saddam Hussein during the two Gulf Wars (p. 146). The linking of sixth-century military strategies with those of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is jarring and, without further analysis, might be misinterpreted by a general audience. The same is true of the deployment of words like “insurgency” and “surge,” which have loaded connotations in today’s political climate, but are deployed with-

out analysis in the context of Berber uprisings against Eastern Roman rule in North Africa (p. 247).

These criticisms should not distract from the over-

all quality of *Rome Resurgent*, which is an accessible and compelling analysis of Justinian's reign that should find a place on the bookshelves of scholars, students, and enthusiasts.

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