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Preview

Since the 1970s the focus in late antique studies has been primarily on social, cultural or religious history; the political, administrative and institutional history of the later Roman empire has received considerably less attention. This applies in particular to late Roman imperial rule, which is in general taken for granted and never really problematized. Late antique emperorship was, for example, not included in the research programme “Transformation of the Roman World” funded in the 1990s by the European Science Foundation. Although there are excellent studies on the reigns of individual late antique emperors, an overall study on the emperor in the late Roman empire is still lacking. It is a good thing that in recent years there is more scholarly interest in late Roman imperial rule. This volume reflects the renewed attention for the institutional history and imperial rule in the late Roman period.

This collection of articles on emperorship in the fourth century goes back to a conference at the University of Konstanz in 2009. The volume is aimed as a reappraisal of the transformation of the monarchical regime of Roman emperors in the period between Diocletian and Theodosius I and intends to examine the emperors' efforts “for political and cultural integration within a communicative framework characterized by the interplay of the imperial administration, the performance of monarchical leadership, and religious policy” (p. x). The book is divided into three parts or fields: 1. Administering the Empire; 2. Performing the Monarchy; 3. Balancing Religious Change. The volume seeks to transcend the boundaries between these fields, which, as the editor not quite correctly states, have mostly been treated separately. This volume also aims at analyzing late Roman imperial rule over a longer period, i.e. the fourth century, instead of studying individual reigns. Apart from the Introduction and Epilogue by the editor, the volume contains eighteen articles by, for the most part, renowned European and American historians of late antiquity.

No emperor rules alone: his power and legitimacy are constructed and negotiated in discourse with those over which he governs. In his Introduction Wienand eloquently explains how imperial power is transformed into legitimate rule in a sociological sense since power can only be exercised on
the basis of societal consensus. Late Roman emperors had constantly to communicate and negotiate their authority, ideology and public image in diverse ways in order to create support among a variety of societal groups: court society, wealthy aristocracy, the military and civil apparatus, the Church, regional interest groups, city elites, city crowds etc. Roman imperial rule is therefore not passive and not just about being, as has long been supposed under the stimulus of Fergus Millar’s influential *The Emperor in the Roman World* (1977); imperial rule is foremost about doing.

It is impossible within the context of this review to discuss all contributions and I will therefore focus on those which I found most interesting and stimulating. This is not to say that the papers I do not mention are of less interest, because on the whole this is an inspiring volume.

1. Administering the Empire. This part contains articles ranging from the changing relationship between emperors and senators (Weisweiler), rank inflation (Dillon) and long-term patterns of integration by regional aristocracies into imperial administration and the court (Kulikowski), to Gaul as decisive territory for controlling the western provinces of the empire (Szidat). Sebastian Schmidt-Hofner discusses the legislation of Valentinian I and Valens of the years 364-365. In this period the new emperors issued a considerable number of new laws and reissued laws of their predecessors addressed to representative of various societal groups. Schmidt-Hofner makes the convincing case that this vast body of legal texts serves as a vehicle to promote the new rule of the Pannonian brothers and has an evident communicative function meant to create loyalty and support for the new regime. Most fourth-century emperors were military men and generals who took the field themselves. Military successes added immensely to an emperor’s prestige and support within Roman society. However, for these successes he was also depended on his (high-ranking) officers as well as the common soldiers. In his contribution Doug Lee examines the relationship between the emperor and the military, in particular the actions an emperor took to ensure the loyalty of his soldiers, both rank-and-file and officers. The loyalty of common soldiers could be won and retained by material benefits and symbolic rituals. High-ranking, ambitious officers, above all the *magistri peditum* and *equitum*, could be the most serious threat to an emperor’s position, as the usurpation of e.g. Magnentius and Magnus Maximus make clear. In order to avert this potential danger an emperor had a variety of strategies at his disposal such as material rewards, enhancement of status by granting the consulship or rise to senatorial status, relocation from one command to another, dismissal, exile and even elimination.

2. Performing the Monarchy. The papers in this section vary from Constantine’s penal legislation as a construction of social discourse and a contribution to the development and justification of monarchical order (Reitzenstein-Rönnings), the dynastic principle as legitimation of emperors (Börm) and panegyrics (Ch. Kelly), to three articles that have civil war and triumph in civil wars as their main theme. Mark Humphries analyzes imperials visits of Constantine, Constantius II and Theodosius to the city of Rome. These are all associated with victories in civil wars; in most cases Rome’s elite had supported the usurpers, which makes the imperial visits extremely significant in communicating imperial power to the inhabitants of the eternal city. Johannes Wienand, in an article that has overlap with that of Humphries,
examines civil-war triumphs in the city of Rome and makes the important observation that Constantine broke with the Republican and early imperial tradition that triumphs could only be celebrated after victories over external enemies. In late antiquity victory in civil wars could show an emperor’s military virtues and the victoria civilis developed into an occasion for triumphal rulership. Hartmut Leppin discusses the treatment of enemy soldiers after a victory in civil wars in three cases: Constantius’ victory over Magnentius, Valens’ defeat of Procopius and Theodosius’ military success against Magnus Maximus. In all three cases the imperial conquerors showed clemency towards the defeated. Clementia seems to have been the usual practice and Leppin perceives here the influence of Christianity. That may be so, but there was undoubtedly the practical reason that emperors always needed soldiers and massacring complete armies was a useless waste of military capital.

3. Balancing Religious Change. The papers in this section discuss a variety of religious issues in association with the changing role of the emperor in religious affairs, particularly the Christianization of emperorship. From an examination of the semi-divine status of the emperor in Eusebius’ Laus Constantini and the contestation by later church fathers of the special relationship between the emperor and God (Drake), Constantine’s relationship with the city of Rome and Rome’s influence on Christian imperial ideology (Bleckmann), the religious policy of Constantius II and his enforcement of a universal creed (Dieffenbach), to religious violence (Hahn). Noel Lenski, taking as a starting point a silver medallion showing on the obverse a diademed bust of Constantine and on the reverse Byzantium’s Tyche, returns to the debate about whether there were pagan dimensions to Constantine’s foundation of Constantinople. In a detailed way, making use of often discarded sources, Lenski comes to the only logical conclusion that there were pagan aspects to the new eastern capital and that Constantine used the cult of Tyche but in an adapted form to make it better suited to an empire in the process of Christianization. This approach reflects Constantine’s religious policy in general: the first Christian emperor had a profound understanding of his scope for action in the religious sphere, in a city and empire which was still predominantly pagan. Rita Lizzi Testa deals with the well-known controversy of the altar of Victory but presents a novel perspective on the demands of Roman senators to have the altar reinstalled. The request for restoration of the altar should not be primarily seen as a “réaction païenne” of the senate but should be perceived within the wider context of the preservation of the monumental appearance of Rome as an expression of the city’s history, its civilization and the victories of the empire.

The volume is concluded by an epilogue by the editor focusing on a gold medallion, issued by Constantius II in Antioch showing the emperor in triumphal glory, as an instructive example of the fourth-century contested monarchy.

All contributions are of high standard and many of them offer new perspectives on and more profound insight into the complexities of late Roman imperial. However, as is often the case with volumes like these, they have also shortcomings and imbalances. Although the volume claims to deal with the fourth-century empire and imperial rule as a whole, quite a number of articles focus on the city of Rome, and on Constantine and the Constantinian dynasty.
(except for Julian). There is little about the second half of the fourth century, i.e. the Valentinian dynasty and Theodosius I. The role of imperial women in integrating the empire is completely neglected. With respect to integrating the empire, processes of communication and interaction, almost all contributions take a top-down approach. A bottom-up perspective, i.e. the sending out of messages to the emperor by the various social strata in Roman society, could have been fruitful since these also shaped imperial leadership and helped to integrate the empire.

Nevertheless, this is a fine collection of articles articulating the contested Roman imperial rule of late antiquity. Everybody interested in the late Roman empire will profit from it.

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