

INTRODUCTION

There are many ways to look at the Late Roman Empire. This book presents one version of Roman imperial history between AD 260 and 641. At its heart lies my feeling that much of the current study of late antiquity fails to understand the Empire itself. Too often, the complexity and reality of the Empire have been masked by the writing of simplified history, both by moderns and by ancients. It is easier to tell the story of Rome in this fashion, but it creates an image of the ancient world as somehow simpler than our own. Since we have only a few glimpses into the feelings of contemporaries about government, understanding the Empire from the point of view of the emperor himself is difficult. When one of the Empire's first rulers, Tiberius I (14–37), said that running the Empire involved “holding a wolf by the ears” (Suetonius, *Tiberius* 25), it poses significant questions about what the emperor did and about the Empire itself.

In writing any sort of history, compromises have to be made. This book is written in the belief that the period between 260 and 641 forms a unity and that events in this period relate more closely to each other than to the period before or after. This period is not defined by Christianity, though this was a large part of what made the Empire different from the first or second centuries. Rather, it was defined by an aristocracy created through service to the emperor and the existence of centralized field armies. It is a long period, and to cover the major events and processes and yet keep the book short enough to be readable requires avoiding deep discussion of many points that would be considered more fully if space were not an issue. As Ammianus Marcellinus wrote in the fourth century, “Besides these battles, many others less worthy of mention were fought in various parts of Gaul, which it would be superfluous to describe, both because their results led to nothing

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worthwhile, and because it is not fitting to spin out a history with insignificant details” (Ammianus 27.2.11). Nonetheless, I remain uneasy about the necessary compression of complex matters, though attempt to comfort myself by taking Plutarch’s view that “the careers of these men embrace such a multitude of events that my preamble shall consist of nothing more than this plea: if I do not record all their most celebrated achievements or describe any of them exhaustively, but merely summarize for the most part what they accomplished, I ask my reader not to regard this as a fault” (*Alexander* 1)

This work is a history of the Late Roman Empire and thus not a history of late antiquity. There is something that justifies the broadly defined study of culture that at its widest covers an area between Ireland and the Indian Ocean between 200 and 800. This work might be seen as traditional or old-fashioned, closely following the approach of J. B. Bury’s 1923 *History of the Later Roman Empire*, though covering a longer time span (Bury covered 395–565). However, the explosion of scholarly interest and the changes in society make it impossible to write a history in the early twenty-first century that could compare to Bury in depth. Religion, for example, plays a much larger role in this work than in his. I feel that this work also benefits considerably from the Brownian approach to late antiquity, since we now have a much more nuanced view of the cultural world of the Roman Empire, i.e., the climate in which decisions were made and the various influences to which Late Roman officials were exposed. In this respect, Jill Harries’ *Law and Empire* has been particularly inspiring for its exposition of a culture of criticism, as well as the concept that repeated laws were those which worked. I also feel that this work owes much to the approaches taken by John Matthews and Fergus Millar to the Empire.

This work is directed toward undergraduate students. In my experiences of teaching this period, I have felt a lack of a modern work that is short enough to be readable but also tells enough of the history of the Roman Empire to facilitate writing assignments and classroom discussion. I have tried to make it clear how our story is written from the primary sources. At the same time, I have restricted suggestions of secondary material to English language works that my students might read, though potential graduate students should not take this to mean that other languages are unnecessary

Three themes run through this history, linking Gallienus in 260 to Heraclius in 641. The first is that the Empire always remained centered on the person of the Roman emperor, who ran the state through meetings. These meetings generated paperwork that was disseminated to officials, and the officials then communicated back to the emperor. For the vast majority of the issues discussed at meetings, there were choices that could be made. Although our source material is imperfect, it frequently allows us to see the

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political process at work, with factions putting forward differing proposals that were decided on by the emperor. This interpretation thus rejects the model (often poorly defined) of an emperor at the mercy of various advisers, such as his wife, eunuchs, or generals. There were periods when such individuals had an influence on policy, but the structure of the Empire was such that these influences were always challenged by other participants in the political process. The second theme is that ruling the Empire required the consensus of the ruled. In the short term, it might be possible to dominate subjects by fear, but in the longer term different methods were likely to be more effective. The Empire was most vulnerable at moments when this consensus broke down and imperial unity was fractured. By the mid-third century, all emperors were aware of the fate of Gaius, Nero, and Commodus and generally avoided their excesses. This brings out a third theme, that there was little that was new about the problems of the late Empire, dominated as it was by issues of extracting resources (whether money, goods, or manpower) to provide security for its inhabitants. Although the means and methods of confronting internal and external problems changed greatly, it was still a continuation of the early Roman Empire, not an entirely new Empire. This did not change with Christianity, though the new religion provided a new way of confronting these sorts of issues. Nonetheless, there are two features that distinguish the study of the Roman Empire in late antiquity from that of the first two centuries AD, even as they do not define it. One is the presence of Christianity, a religion that eventually penetrated into every village of the Roman imperial state. And the other is the volume of primary evidence, itself in part the result of Christianity. We thus have far more details, far more complaints about taxation, etc., but know little about earlier situations where the evidence for the state, driven by epigraphy, is often different. The way that this evidence is read has changed dramatically over the past half-century, as modern scholars have a growing awareness of the tendency of our sources to select and edit their work, both as they were arguing their cases, and then subsequently as they made these cases to posterity.

The continuity of the Empire and its administration was part of its success. The repetition of the same events, of campaigns against the Franks and the Persians, of struggles with bishops, and of complaints and petitions to the emperors, can occasionally become tedious to read. But this repetition is the fabric of the Empire, even as it crumbled in the west in the fifth century. This history also takes a positive view of emperors and their administration. The majority of Romans involved in imperial administration worked long hours and tried to be fair. Many of them also made mistakes, and some would have been corrupt, others lazy. But to judge their performance from the writings of petitioners arguing cases, and in particular from

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the participants in ecclesiastical disputes, would be a poor methodology. Imperial records make a far better case for how the emperors wished to run the state, though we have so few of these and so many complaints. We find the bishop Theodoret in 448 writing two letters to imperial officials, questioning whether the emperor really had sent a letter to him. Since this letter had been delivered personally by the *comes* Rufus, and Theodoret had acknowledged its receipt in writing, it is probably better to see a man resisting authority rather than seriously doubting that the letter had actually been sent by the emperor (*Ep.* 79, 80). This sort of criticism of government is similar to that of sports fans of their team's managers; nonstop, negative, blessed by hindsight, and commenting on things about which they know little and can't do for themselves. This optimistic point of view may sometimes have led me to view events through rose-tinted glasses. The Late Roman Empire was often, if not always, a violent, corrupt, prejudiced state, but it was also one where imperial clemency was a virtue, and one often practiced.

Writing this book would not have been possible without others. First are my fellow ancient historians, whom I find constantly stimulating on paper and in person; these dialogues have increased my understanding enormously. A second group is my colleagues (other teachers, librarians, and support staff) at the various institutions at which I have worked, whose constant interest in what I do both surprises and humbles me. And third are the students I've been privileged to teach. The staff at Cambridge University Press and the anonymous referees have also been outstanding. My thanks to you all.