

Peter Heather: *Rome Resurgent. War and Empire in the Age of Justinian*. New York: Oxford University Press 2018 (*Ancient Warfare and Civilization*). VII, 393 p., 17 ill., 6 maps. £ 22.99/\$ 29.95. ISBN: 978-0-19-936274-5.

*Rome Resurgent* is the much-needed up-to-date history of Justinian's rule in English that aims to interest both specialists and a wider, non-scholarly public.<sup>1</sup> Peter Heather, professor of Medieval History at King's College London, has thus produced the fourth installment in a series of popularizing books by his hand on the history of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> In these previous works and in his academic work in general, Heather focusses on the histories of "barbarian" peoples, particularly the Goths, whose violent migrations he considers an important factor that lead to the destruction of Roman power. With *Rome Resurgent*, Heather switches his focus from the fall of Rome and the western half of the empire to the survival of Constantinople and the eastern half. What remains unchanged in this story of survival and, indeed, resurgence, is Heather's emphasis on military history, particularly the violence and destruction armies can cause, be they Roman or barbarian.

- 1 Justinian's rule and Procopius' writings as its main source have enjoyed much scholarly attention over the last two decades; notable (revisionist) works include A. Kaldellis: *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity*. Philadelphia 2004; H. Leppin: *Justinian. Das christliche Experiment*. Stuttgart 2011 and M. Meier: *Das andere Zeitalter Justinians. Kontingenzerfahrung und Kontingenzbewältigung im 6. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* Göttingen 2003 (*Hypomnemata* 147). Heather naturally uses all of these works in *Rome Resurgent*, with a garbled "kintingenzbewältigung" in his bibliography (379). The last popularizing English books on Justinian (both also cited by Heather) date from the 1990s: J. Moorhead: *Justinian*. London 1994 (*The Medieval World*) and J.A.S. Evans: *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power*. London/New York 1996 (the latter wrongly dated to 2001 in Heather's bibliography (375)).
- 2 Three popularizing works by Heather precede his *Rome Resurgent*: *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*. London 2005 (strangely cited inadequately in the bibliography of *Rome Resurgent* as *The Fall of Rome: A New History* (377)); *Empires and Barbarians*. London 2009 and *The Restoration of Rome: Barbarian Popes and Imperial Pretenders*. London 2013. German translations of all three works have appeared, and *Rome Resurgent* was no less promptly translated (by Cornelius Hartz) under the title: *Die letzte Blüte Roms. Das Zeitalter Justinians*. Darmstadt 2018.

The eleven chapters of *Rome Resurgent* recount the military-political history of the Eastern Roman empire from Constantine to Heraclius. The first three chapters treat pre-Justinianic times (which Heather has covered more extensively in his three previous installments); chapters four to nine offer a chronological narrative of the reign of Justinian; the last two chapters tell how more and less crucial territories were lost to the Eastern Roman empire in the decades after Justinian. The book includes six maps at the beginning that are helpful to varying degrees (most names on map 3, “Constantinople in the Age of Justinian”, are all but illegible); it closes with a timeline, a glossary, notes with lists of primary and secondary sources, and a general index. More attention should have been paid to the illustrations: a general list of them is lacking and, what is worse, some figures hardly fit the text they ought to illustrate.<sup>3</sup>

In his introduction, Heather sets himself the task of answering two fundamental questions that have occupied many historians who work on the age of Justinian. First, what was the rationale (if any existed at all) behind Justinian’s *reconquista*: was it all premeditated, as Justinian himself claimed, or was it a rather more pragmatic policy that developed along the way, as most scholars currently argue? Secondly, to what extent did the cost Justinian invested in his campaigns render the empire vulnerable to the Lombard, Persian, and Arabic invasions in the later sixth and seventh centuries? As many (traditionalist) historians of Justinian before him, Heather essentially follows the lead of Procopius’ *Wars* to formulate answers to these questions. However, Heather broadens the scope, arguing that “testing Procopius’ account of Justinian’s reign against both the demands and practical limitations imposed by the structures—ideological and practical—of the later Roman Empire provides its own kind of control on the interpretative presentations of our central source and helps unravel properly both the causes and effects of his extraordinary career of western conquest” (18).

3 Figure I.2 (4), a portrait of Justin I (obviously from an early modern edition, so with little value as a historical representation of the emperor), has no link with the text where it is referred to (about Visigoths and Vandal-Alans being outsiders to the empire); figure 4.1 (112) represents Narses, who only plays a minor role in the text at this point; figure 4.2 (116), a Vandal coin issued under Gelimer, would have suited better in chapter 5, which is the main chapter about the Vandal kingdom; similarly figure 6.2 (160), an early-modern portrait of Totila, would have had a more proper place in chapter 9.

Heather devotes ample attention to these structures of the later Roman Empire by describing events and developments in the two centuries preceding Justinian's reign in his first three chapters. This extensive treatment of the pre-history to the Age of Justinian (76 out of a total of 313 pages of narrative) does an impressive job at introducing the two fields that drive Heather's history of the later Roman Empire. First, there is Heather's view on politics: the main concern of any Roman emperor is to remain in power, and the most effective way to legitimize one's imperial rule is to gain (or claim) victory in war. Heather also underscores the importance of political dynamics surrounding (potential) succession in Late Antiquity, as it offered both risks and opportunities to all high-ranking persons in a court-based society.<sup>4</sup> Military history is the other main driving force. Rather than the fortune of battles or the genius of single generals, Heather sees structural developments in strategy and technology as the most important factors: they determine the stability of empires and the outcome of wars. *Rome Resurgent* thus contains some large sweeps that one may criticize, question, or at least nuance; on the other hand, Heather's observations are always thought-provoking and based on a thorough understanding of late antique history.

The most important military-political complex in *Rome Resurgent* is the Roman-Sassanian stand-off: its consequences defined the late antique Roman Empire. Going all the way back to the third century, Heather first identifies "[t]he rise of Persia to superpower status under the Sassanian dynasty" (46–47) as the cause of major reforms within the Roman empire. First, it led to a reorganization of the structure of the army, which henceforth consisted of field armies (*palatini* and *comitatenses*) and frontier troops (*limitanenses* and *ripenenses*). The permanent presence on the Persian border of almost half of the empire's troops also caused a redistribution of power within the military hierarchy, as any general in command of such forces might be tempted to claim the supreme imperial power for himself. Therefore, the presence of an emperor in the east was required to lead the troops there in person or to oversee their command. Lastly, more funds had to be made available to maintain the reorganized army, whose numbers had increased by at least fifty percent. This led to rigorous fiscal and bureaucratic reforms, which, in turn,

4 Heather's modern example of Michael Gove backstabbing Boris Johnson (adduced on 32 and 84) is already hopelessly outdated as an illustration of the unpredictable dynamics of succession. In this context, his prosopopoeia of Bill Clinton as a medieval historian, "It's about the succession, stupid," (148) is more successful.

made their mark (mostly in a negative sense, according to Heather) on late antique society. Such circumstances defined the empire and its armies that Justinian inherited when he rose to the throne in 527, Heather observes in conclusion of his first two chapters. He thus neglects other factors (notably religious changes) that certainly played a role in the transformations that Roman state and society underwent during the almost three centuries that separate the rise of Shapur I from Justinian's accession. Nonetheless, the argument Heather presents is compelling and probably goes a long way in explaining the trends he is addressing in this book.

The Roman-Sassanian antagonism remains of crucial importance in Heather's account of Justinian's reign itself, where it again functions as a starting point to explain many consequent developments, internal and external to the Roman Empire. Here, however, its explanatory force is less convincing, to the point where it resembles conspiracy thinking: combined with his presumed lust for war as a way to legitimate his rule, Heather sees the outcome of Justinian's first war with the Sassanians as the ultimate cause for most of what happens during the rest of Justinian's reign (and, indeed, beyond). The emperor, who takes the guilt for all the havoc this and later wars wreak, is not the scheming devil bent on the destruction of mankind we know from the *Anekdotia*. Heather's Justinian is driven by ambitions far more banal: his opportunistic campaigns merely serve to restore or increase the ideological and political credibility of his regime. In line with the modern scholarly consensus, *Rome Resurgent* discredits Justinian's claim that he had always fostered the mission of "making Rome great again"<sup>5</sup>. Rather, he posits that it was only conceived during or after the unexpected success of the Vandal war. In discrediting the regime's lofty intentions, Heather denies Justinian any humane considerations at all, risking, at times, to overemphasize the mundanity of the emperor's motivations.

We first encounter this perspective on Justinian's wars in the discussion of the policies of Justin I, Justinian's uncle and predecessor (chapter 4). The emperor and his nephew deliberately sought a deterioration of diplomatic relationships with Persia, which had been stable for more than a century. Revealing their hawkish provocations in a pair of (previously misinterpreted)

5 On the occasion of the presentation of the German translation of *Rome Resurgent*, Heather held a lecture in Tübingen on 29-04-2019, which the reviewer attended. Heather there revealed that he originally wanted to title his book "Making Rome Great Again"; his editor, however, did not approve of this.

incidents, Heather argues that they aimed to destabilize their powerful neighbor and possibly used the opportunity to neutralize a potential rival to Justinian's succession along the way. In the subsequent first years of Justinian's reign, the new emperor exploited the now imminent war with Persia as a chance to gain martial victories as a proof of divine support. However, after initial success, Justinian's armies suffered what was, in Heather's eyes, a disastrous defeat at the battle of Callinicum, which had the dire consequence that Justinian could no longer claim God's benevolence. What followed was the absolute nadir of his reign, the crisis of the Nika revolt, whose destructions Heather impressively transfers to a modern scale to emphasize their impact.<sup>6</sup> The expedition against the Vandals organized a few years later was by no means part of a premeditated plan of Western reconquest; it was rather a piece of "overseas adventurism as the last desperate gamble of a bankrupt regime" (121). Although it is right to consider the expedition as a pragmatic move rather than the first step in a planned *reconquista*, it may be doubted how "desperate" this gamble was considering the small size and cautious progress of Belisarius' force (it was definitely not an "all in" move).

Heather's account of the Vandal War and the first stage of the Gothic War (chapters 5 and 6) largely follows the narrative of Procopius' *Wars*. Albeit without explicit acknowledgment, Heather also echoes the prologue of the *Wars* (1.1.7–17) in emphasizing the decisive role of the Hunnic-style mounted archers in Roman service. This type of unit was relatively new to the Roman army: it was introduced in the fifth century to counter Hunnic incursions, as Heather had described in chapter 2. The title of Heather's chapter on the Vandal War, "Five Thousand Horse", indicates the importance he ascribes to them: they gave Belisarius' expedition a technological edge over the Vandals. Consequently, the latter "were caught fighting a sixth-century war with a fifth-century army" (146). Heather identifies no similar structural cause for the initial Roman victory over the Gothic kingdom in Italy, which culminated in Wittigis' capitulation of Ravenna. Belisarius' victorious engagements at Naples, Rome, and along the Via Flaminia

6 "Around thirty thousand people died in the street fighting and Hippodrome massacre. This is slaughter on the same scale as that required to keep the previous president Assad in power in Syria in the early 1980s, and that's without taking account of relative scale. [...] Nika killed around 5 per cent of [Constantinople's] inhabitants, the equivalent of, say, four hundred thousand dead among the current population of New York City." (111).

are rather explained as combinations of opportunistic good fortune on the Roman side and poor strategic planning on the side of Wittigis and the Gothic generals.

Chapters 7–9 deal with the consequences of these conquests, for the better, but mostly for the worst. On the basis of these military victories Justinian built a “Culture of Victory”, as chapter 7 is titled. It treats Justinian’s projects and politics in Constantinople and the empire at large: the production of the *Digesta* as a more ambitious sequel to the *Codex Justinianus*, the construction of the Hagia Sophia as a paradigm of Christian architecture, and his attempts to unify the church. Heather rigorously strips these projects of intrinsic ideological (religious) motivations. Instead, he posits that their main aim was to strengthen Justinian’s political legitimacy and legacy: “Two great victories gave Justinian political capital to burn, and he proceeded to invest it liberally.” (182) This argument imposes an undue level of Realpolitik on late-antique politics, in which the importance of more irrational motivations such as personal piety (which, of course, is harder to gauge historically) cannot be underestimated. On the other hand, Heather rightly observes that the intense emphasis on military victory as a sign of divine support in Justinianic propaganda created expectations that the regime could not continue to fulfill, especially when its armies faced serious defeats in the West and the East during the 540s. Chapters 8 (on Persia) and 9 (on Africa and Italy) tell the story of these setbacks. They largely follow Procopius’ narrative of the Sasanian war that started in 540, the rebellions in Africa, and the last flourish and final defeat of Gothic power in Italy. Heather’s attention in these chapters is mainly with campaigning kings and generals, which is slightly unsatisfactory as it leaves open the question of how the regime reacted to the crises it faced (now for a second time).

The last two chapters evaluate the consequences of Justinian’s campaigns for the various parts of his empire, thus addressing the second question Rome Resurgent aims to answer: were the conquests worth the effort, or did they overextend the forces of the Eastern Roman Empire, leaving large parts of the empire prey to invasion? Heather’s answer to this question is neatly balanced. First, he never fails to stress the inexcusable human suffering Justinian’s wars caused. On a more pragmatic level, he also considers the economic profit of these conquests, which turns out to be surprisingly positive. The wars in Italy left the Balkans exposed to invasions by Cutrigurs and Slavs, and the limited effort of gaining a foothold in Spain almost certainly

did not pay off. On the other hand, “North Africa, Sicily, and just about enough of Italy were all held on to for just about long enough by Constantinople to repay Justinian’s investment” (300). In the end, the fate of Justinian’s western reconquests as well as that of the Eastern Roman Empire itself was, again, decided by military-political developments in the east. The wars of the later sixth- and seventh-centuries with the Sassanians and, later, the Arabs caused the destruction and, ultimately, the loss of the economic heartlands of the Eastern Empire. As all of its military capacity was required in the east, the empire could not hold on to its western possessions in the long run. The definitive loss of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, and the destruction brought upon Asia Minor effectively made the empire to no more than a regional power, “a successor state [...] to the Roman Empire” (310). Heather concludes with the sensible verdict that too much time passed between Justinian’s wars and the loss of the empire’s heartlands for the former to have been a direct cause of the latter (archaeological evidence, indeed, rather points at continued prosperity in the east during Justinian’s reign). However, Heather concludes, Justinian’s escalation of the Sassanian conflict, combined with his culture of victory, proved a “poisonously successful legacy” (331) for his successors, whose constant wars with the east ultimately caused the destruction of the Persian and the depletion of the Eastern Roman empire.

In sum, *Rome Resurgent* presents an accessible, eloquent account of the Age of Justinian. Not only does Heather bring his expertise on late antique history to the subject, he also shows his mastery in the art of writing historical narrative. His account of the military and political vicissitudes of the Eastern Empire under Justinian is a shining example of historical narrative based on cause-and-effect. For a lay public, it offers an excellent introduction into the reign of Justinian and the unscrupulous politics of power that, in the eyes of many historians, characterized this emperor’s reign. Scholars of Late Antiquity, however, may take issue with Heather’s (overly) skeptical outlook and his prioritization of military and political history. Moreover, *Rome Resurgent* misses out on a number of recent publications of importance,<sup>7</sup>

7 Notably, a number of books that deal with (aspects of) military history under Justinian: C. Koehn: *Justinian und die Armee des frühen Byzanz*. Berlin/Boston 2018 (*Millennium-Studien* 70); D.A. Parnell: *Justinian’s Men. Careers and Relationships of Byzantine Army Officers*, 518–610. London 2017 (*New Approaches to Byzantine History and Culture*), reviewed by D. Syrbe, *Plekos* 21, 2019, 441–452, URL: <http://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2019/r-parnell.pdf>; A. Sarantis: *Justinian’s Balkan Wars. Campaigning, Diplomacy and Development in Illyricum, Thrace and*

whose inclusion might have necessitated smaller or larger revisions of Heather's arguments. Heather certainly offers original observations that are of interest to an expert audience, but, on the whole, his work balances between synthesis of existing literature and a personal critical reading of Procopius' writings. In the end, the merits of *Rome Resurgent* should certainly outweigh these objections:<sup>8</sup> it more than fulfills the need of a new, well-informed English introduction into the Age of Justinian.

the Northern World A.D. 527–65. Prenton 2016 (Arca 53), reviewed by A. Petratos, *Plekos* 19, 2017, 215–219, URL: <http://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2017/r-sarantis.pdf>. A minor slip is Heather's remark: "There is no modern large-scale treatment of Zeno's reign" (354 n. 5). What about R. Kosiński: *The Emperor Zeno: Religion and Politics*. Cracow 2010 (*Byzantina et Slavica Cracoviensia* 6) and P. Crawford: *Roman Emperor Zeno. The Perils of Power Politics in Fifth-Century Constantinople*. Barnsley 2019?

- 8 In addition to the issues concerning illustrations and the mistakes in the bibliography listed in nn. 1 and 2 above, the reviewer noticed the following (editorial) errors: "*debellator gentes*" (30) > "*debellator gentium*"; "as was true for many other pre-industrial elites" (61) seems to be in the wrong place, should probably follow "characteristically landowners." (61); "was a certainly a disaster" (107) > "was certainly a disaster"; "exactly, how many" (110) > "exactly how many"; "Roman army: their dependents" (128) > "Roman army, their dependents"; "... in quote should come after "reverence." (154); "*(auxilia ... divino)*" (154) > "*(divino auxilio)*"; "Vouille" (155) > "Vouillé"; "Ossimo" (165, 171 and 389 (*Index*)) > "Osimo"; "Papinian [AD 143–121]" (185) > "Papinian [AD 143–221]"; "compare it the extenuated" (195) > "compare it **to** the extenuated"; "His largest project collected extracts were to be made from the learning of classical antiquity, pagan and Christian, and arranged them in thematic volumes." (211) should be revised in its entirety; "Two days, march" (218) > "Two days' march"; "Chosroes astonishing campaign" (220) > "Chosroes's astonishing campaign"; "Chosroes paranoid" (220) > "Chosroes's paranoid"; "in 545 therefore" (224) is oddly positioned in the sentence; "with economies were much more focused" (241) > "with economies **that** were much more focused"; "in Liguria, in the north-east" (254) > "in Liguria, in the north-west"; "Auximum" (259) > "Osimo" (for consistency); "Narses" (353 n. 17) > "Narses's"; "Dignas and Winter (2007, 34–44)" (355 n. 35) > "Dignas and Winter (2007), **104–6**"; "Kaldellis (2004), 24ff." (356 n. 19) > "Kaldellis (2004), **36f.**"; "Leppin 149–58" (357 n. 24) > "Leppin (**2011**), 149–58"; "*Const Tanta*" (361 nn. 4 and 9) > "*Const. Tanta*"; "\*" (364 n. 4) should be deleted; "*SH*" (from 365 n. 3 onwards) is used as an abbreviation of Procopius' *Secret History*, which was to that point referred to as *Anekdotia*; "There is **an** excellent" (368 n. 9) > "There is excellent"; "Caucasus" (385 (*Index*)) > "Caucasus"; "Henry VIII, king of England, 4" (387 (*Index*)): Henry VIII is not mentioned on that page or on the surrounding pages.



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Empfohlene Zitierweise

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