

Mischa Meier: *Geschichte der Völkerwanderung. Europa, Asien und Afrika vom 3. bis zum 8. Jahrhundert n. Chr.* München: Verlag C. H. Beck 2019 (Historische Bibliothek der Gerda Henkel Stiftung). 1531 p., 40 ill., 38 maps. € 58.00. ISBN 978-3-406-73959-0.

This is an extraordinary book, in all sorts of ways. It is extraordinarily long, as is the way with all the volumes in this Beck series, although Meier's has an extraordinary clarity that belies its length. A comprehensive narrative of the period from the late fourth century AD to the later sixth century, with substantial glances at earlier and later periods, it is buttressed by two hundred and fifty pages of notes and one hundred and fifty of bibliography. Of greater significance still are the one hundred and twenty-five pages of introductory discussion, offering the reader a brilliant overview of the methodological and conceptual problems that beset the study of Late Antiquity. Meier's is the first work of this scale, in any of the main scholarly languages, to have fully absorbed the multiple controversies surrounding barbarian ethnicity and identity, as well as related but not identical archaeological controversies, and to have moved decisively beyond them.

This is also a very generous book, laudably free from polemic even against positions with which the author disagrees. Other scholars are cited where their conclusions are accepted, or where their ideas are valuable even if disputable, but nothing is ever invoked for the mere pleasure of attacking it. Given the extensive annotation, and the academic's habitual delight in prosecuting feuds by way of citation, that is an achievement worth underscoring. Finally, Meier's book is generous in its prose style, which is clear and will be accessible even to readers whose German is not all it might be. Despite its length, this it would be an excellent beginner's text for Anglophone students first approaching German-language scholarship and should be recommended as such.

Anyone interested will already have inferred the overall shape of the volume, so there is no particular utility in summarizing its contents exhaustively here. There are only so many different ways to write a narrative history of these centuries covered. We must all start from the same basic sources, more – or usually less – extensive in different decades and in different genres, and while some details of chronology are open to dispute because the evidence is so sparse, the basic outline of affairs is well known. There is more room for differing analytical emphasis, to be sure and, again because of limited evi-

dence, there will always be room for disputes over precise chains of cause and effect. But again, the basic outlines of *histoire événementielle* are well known.

Meier briefly considers third-century changes among the frontier peoples, especially north of the Black Sea, before offering an outline of early Gothic history and the impact on it of the so-called *Hunnensturm*. He then steps back in time and considers Roman North Africa over the same period, which is useful, because it successfully de-privileges European or ‘Germanic’ barbarians in the narrative of the era – and because his treatment of the Mauri and the ambiguity of their status as citizens/subjects/foreigners is unusually sophisticated in an overview of this type. A similar kind of de-privileging is accomplished by his next moving to the third and fourth centuries on the eastern frontier and beyond it, with especial focus on the Arabs or Saracens between the Roman and Persian empires. This perspective still focalizes events from a Roman imperial perspective, but it again decentres the European frontier, to which he only returns again in the fifth main chapter, on the Rhine *limes* and the western dioceses of the empire. Here, the emphasis on coexistence and the limited scale of warfare very usefully undermines old-fashioned paradigms that read the undoubted and violent invasions of the fifth century into a supposed series of *vagues germaniques* stretching backward and forward in time.

Thereafter, and in keeping with the best recent scholarly trends as exemplified in recent books by Guy Halsall, Henning Börm, and Christine Delaplace,¹ Meier treats the 400s as ‘Ein Jahrhundert der Bürgerkriege’ rather than through a prism of foreign invaders, still less violent immigrants, attacking and destroying the western empire. This fifth-century narrative (chapter 6, of twelve) is very long, but there is a conceptual elegance in the way Meier links the death agony of the western imperial polity to an account of possible solutions and alternatives, and in particular to the ‘Projekt Italien’ of Odoacer and Theodoric. The next chapter, 7, is perhaps the most conventional in the book, covering the various embryonic kingdoms of post-Roman Europe, but it does not make the mistake of privileging the eventual ‘winners’ (the Franks) over the abortive kingdoms of Goths, Burgundians, or indeed Thuringians and Suevi. Fittingly, fifth-century Africa is then given

1 G. Halsall: *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376–568*. Cambridge 2007; H. Börm: *Westrom. Von Honorius bis Justinian*. 2. edn. Stuttgart 2018; Ch. Delaplace: *La fin de l’Empire romain d’Occident. Rome et les Wisigoths de 382 à 531*. Rennes 2015.

a chapter of its own, one that is informed by Roland Steinacher's magnificent recent *Die Vandalen* (2015) and the late Yves Modéran's crucial studies of the Mauri. Moving from the Mediterranean to the eastern frontier and beyond, Meier's ninth chapter surveys first the Sasanians' eastern frontier in the Kyzylkum, Hindu Kush and Pamirs, and only then turns to the desert frontier with Rome. This is another explicit nod to decentring Europe's barbarians in the narrative, and is also a vital – and still too rare – recognition that the Central and South Asian frontiers of the Persian empire were generally of far greater concern to the shahanshahs than was their endemic but really rather static rivalry with Rome. The rest of the chapter surveys the internal history of the eastern Roman empire in the fifth century, while chapter ten returns us to the west, for a survey of the main regional powers that bridged the transition from Antiquity to the Latin Middle Ages. The level of narrative detail is perceptibly more cursory here, as it is in chapter eleven, which covers the transformation of the eastern empire under Justinian and his successors. The seventh and eighth centuries are sketched, rather than narrated in detail, but the salient outlines of the Islamic transformation of Egypt, the Levant, and North Africa are sensitively treated. A short but perceptive epilogue sums up the themes first adumbrated in the long methodological introduction, themes that have by now played out over almost a thousand pages of masterly narrative.

Rather than pursue any one part of Meier's narrative approach in detail, it will suffice to say that names, facts and dates are reliably reported, authorities and secondary literature are scrupulously cited, and the quibbles I have with points of fact and details of interpretation are fundamentally trivial. I will instead, focus on two of the main themes that set Meier's book apart from comparable efforts: the Eurasian context on the one hand, and identity and ethnicity on the other. In his handling of the first of these themes, Meier succeeds in part; on the second, it is an unimpeachable triumph. What we might call a 'Eurasian turn' in approaches to Late Antiquity has suddenly become fashionable. Barely a glimmer in the eye of scholarship three decades ago, the last decade has seen numerous conferences and exhibitions designed to bring two traditional narratives – the decline and fall of the Roman empire on the one hand, and the steady progress of China's dynastic history on the other – into dialogue with one another. Whether this is accomplished by way of the Silk Road and Central Asia, trans-Himalayan interactions, or the Indian Ocean world matters very little: the goal, to demon-

strate connections, is the same. As an interpretative trend, this is analogous to, and contemporary with, a vogue for comparative treatment of ancient empires, but the two trends are decidedly not the same thing. The latter approach has produced little beyond banalities for the simple reason that, before the dawn of modern communications technology, there was a very limited repertory of solutions for large empires to use to combat the tyranny of long distances: solutions that were invented and reinvented independently around the world.

The Eurasian interactionist approach, by contrast, seeks to recognize and account for the fact that even in later Antiquity, and even despite the tyranny of long distances, the internal histories, and the regional rhythms within, the different parts of three interlinked continents were subject to actual influence by events taking place half a world away. For the most part, the players involved had no certain knowledge, sometimes no knowledge at all, of those far distant lands. Yet despite that, the collapse of the Xiongnu hegemony could be felt, ever so faintly, on the edge of the Caucasus and the Ukrainian steppe, while a Byzantine outpost on the Crimea could mobilize Turk armies in what is now Kazakhstan and Xinjiang. Meier is not the first scholar to attempt to write this transcontinental reality into his narrative, though he is almost certainly the most successful yet; even so, he illustrates the limits of what this approach can achieve in the hands of a single person.² The central problem is that no one scholar can master the sources, still less the literature and its controversies, of all the different geographical zones and modern national historiographies that one needs to be able to address. If nothing else, no one person commands the range of ancient and modern languages needed to do so, or to sort through all the salient scholarly controversies, which often reflect (highly local or national) modern intellectual development more than anything intrinsic in the sources.

Wherever one starts – the Kushans in South Asia or the Han in China, Parthians in Iran or Romans on the Danube – the scholar with visions of Eurasian scale narrative must rely on summaries and synthetic works, and hope, in so doing, not to import error or retail merely idiosyncratic interpretations, or the sort one would never countenance in one's own specialty. Equally, it

2 I have attempted something similar in my *Imperial Triumph* (2016) and *Imperial Tragedy* (2019) and the limitations I point to here are if anything more visible in my own work.

is simply impossible not to privilege the evidence one best understands, be it from Rome, or Persia, or China, even with a conscious effort to try not to do so. And thus, far too often, the attempt at integrating different Eurasian narratives becomes laboured, or loses the sense of proportion that is more easily kept in mind within a particular narrative tradition. Many years from now, and given the requisite academic good will, the eventual solution will be a much wider-spread availability of high-quality translations, which will in turn allow for multi-authored modern narratives: not, as now, in the form of handbooks or companions, but rather as true collaborations, in which specialists don't simply each contribute a separate tranche of a collective whole, but rather attempt to meaningfully absorb the broad narrative and interpretative outlines of the other's specialisms, thus producing genuinely collaborative narratives that honour the local and regional equally on all sides, while never losing sight of a wider, continental salience. That approach, of course, is the precise opposite of the single-authored synthetic narrative, one with a strong authorial voice and a clear sense of interpretative perspective. Meier comes as close to squaring this circle as one could reasonably ask, but one need only place his perfectly good account of Sasanians and Hephthalites next to his brilliant account of Romans and Alamanni, a relationship of far less world-historical importance, to see what I mean.

When it comes to the question of identity and especially barbarian ethnicity, however, Meier faces up to and triumphs over a challenge that has often defeated, and always tripped up, previous authors. In the aftermath of the Second World War, German-speaking scholars quite understandably sought to break with a very old historico-philological tradition of *germanische Altertumskunde* which had been embraced by, and in some people's judgement contributed to, the horrors of National Socialism. Beginning with an important, much cited and still little read study by Reinhard Wenskus (*Stammesbildung und Verfassung* in 1961)³, but really only gaining traction in the 1970s Vienna of the medievalist Herwig Wolfram, scholars broke down the idea of ethnically homogeneous barbarian communities united by birth, language, material culture and religion, and began to consider ethnicity as socially constructed and situationally deployed – just the opposite of the *Blut und Boden* identities baked into the assumptions of the old *Altertumskunde*. When this research began to be noticed outside the German-speaking acad-

3 Note that the 1977 version often cited as a 'second-edition' is in fact an anastatic reprint of the rare original.

emy, it was met with a great deal of enthusiasm, and a small but determined critique, not always of the content and its undoubted insights, but rather of the claim to a clean break with pre-war scholarship. The *Historikerstreit* that ensued – and I choose that loaded term intentionally – was unpleasant, frequently unfair, or, as Meier puts it here, *beillos*. Now, several decades on, the stakes of the dispute seem disproportionate to the damage that was done, especially given that the distance between the opposed positions was much smaller than it seemed to be in the heat of controversy. All the same, it remains difficult for those once involved in the controversies to write on these topics without their echoes obtruding. It is in that fact that Meier's triumph lies, as the first scholar to have both mastered the outlines of the controversies, grappled with the literature without *parti pris*, and really applied the theoretical and analytical advances of recent years to the construction of his narrative.

In some ways, this represents a continuation of Meier's brief, excellent account, co-authored with Steffen Patzold, of the historiographical controversies swirling around the meaning of the year 410 and Alaric's three-day sack of Rome.⁴ In it, they demonstrated a clear mastery of different historiographical schools, each of which read the events of that ancient August according to whole sets of methodological and historiographical assumptions, which inevitably produced sometimes embittered conflicts. That work demonstrated Meier's ability to work with difficult topics, and sensitive academic politics, and bring a clear-eyed and fair-minded outsider's view to their substance. He outlines the different positions at stake in discussions of barbarian identity. He firmly rejects the essentialist binary of Roman and barbarian or Roman and 'German'. He recognizes that identities are multiple and shifting, that ethnic, political, even to some extent linguistic identities are performances, though they can be very deeply felt – and that old markers of identity can gain new meanings, old names can disappear and reappear, and that these phenomena need not, indeed often do not, reflect biological population continuities. At the same time, continuities real or imagined certainly did exist – although our capacity to reconstruct them is quite limited. In particular, the stories a generation tells itself about presumed ancestors in olden times reflect that generation's present needs, present self-assessment and self-evaluation as much as it does any authentic tradition, without that

4 M. Meier/St. Patzold: August 410 – Ein Kampf um Rom. Stuttgart 2010.

meaning no authentic historical traditions existed. Similarly, one can acknowledge the wholesale use of Graeco-Roman models in early medieval narratives of barbarian pasts, but doing so does not somehow alienate them from a tradition trying to understand the post-Roman kingdoms on their own terms.

And so on. Readers with an interest in such things will recognize which scholarly literatures are being engaged, which conclusions accepted, which left aside in silence. They will also see clearly that Meier has little time for the catastrophist model of alien invaders, immigrant violence, and crushing exogenous shock as engines of historical change. Where Meier is at his most successful, apart from the clear and non-partisan delineation of these arguments, is in their practical application. It is always difficult to take nuanced understandings possible in analytical discussions and apply them in constructing a narrative. Analyses tend to be synchronic, they can take account of rhetorical contexts, move from the abstract to the particular, recognize that different genres may speak to different aspects of the same problem and yet not be susceptible of connection one with the other. Narrative is diachronic and the sense of chronology, cause, effect, even meaning can be disrupted by too many pauses for analysis, too many hedges and qualifications – all the more so when what is at stake is controversial. Meier manages it by never slipping into unhelpful, essentializing shorthand ('the Frank Arbogast', 'the Vandal Stilicho', as if those designations held content beyond their nomenclature). Likewise, he generally escapes monolithic characterization, or binaries that imply identity: we don't find 'Vandal Africa' as a protagonist, or 'the Ostrogoths' doing this or that, we find Gaiseric, or Theodoric, directing public actions. No attentive reader can come away from this book still thinking in terms of imperial good guys and barbarian bad guys, or even that contemporaries would always have recognized one group of the other. It is quite an achievement.

In short, this is now the best introduction to the political history of Late Antiquity available in any scholarly language. Comprehensive, judicious, cautious without conservatism, modern but not modish. It deserves the widest possible audience and can serve as a model for making serious, difficult scholarship comprehensible to specialist and non-specialist alike.

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