

Paolo Delogu: *Roma all'inizio del medioevo. Storie, luoghi, persone (secoli VI–IX)*. Roma: Carocci editore 2022 (Biblioteca di testi e studi 1505. Studi storici). 427 p., 9 ill. € 44.00. ISBN 978-88-290-1696-9.

Providing a detailed and up-to-date review of our knowledge of the city of Rome during the sixth to ninth centuries, Paolo Delogu has written a dense, thoughtful book that will serve university students in good stead and be of value and interest to colleagues as well as the general public. The author, professor emeritus of the Sapienza Università di Roma, meets and surpasses the expectations engendered by his long and distinguished record of work in the field¹, and this overview of early medieval Rome constitutes a welcome contribution to a field that has witnessed an unexpected renaissance in recent years.² Indeed, the book's appearance last fall at the same moment that the exhibition "Il volto di Roma" opened was a felicitous coincidence, as this book as chance would have it nicely complements the treatment furnished by that exhibition.³ Virtually co-terminous with the birth, life, and death of the church of Santa Maria Antiqua (ca. 550 – ca. 850), the decoration of which has appropriately been used for the cover image, this book offers a colourful pageant in place of the oblivion characteristic of modern treatment of the 'Dark Ages'.

While the book's organisation in chapters and sections reminds this reviewer of the novels of Mario Vargas Llosa (e. g. "Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter") or Milan Kundera (e. g. "Immortality"), the effect of the forbidding mass of text in which paragraphs are deployed may leave readers with a sense of plodding through Leo Tolstoy's "War and Peace". Readers are forewarned! Austere and workmanlike in terms of presentation, this book consists of nearly four hundred pages of text accompanied by only nine black-and-white

1 E. g. P. Delogu: *Introduzione allo studio della storia medievale*. Bologna 1994 (Orientamenti); P. Delogu: *Le origini del medioevo. Studi sul settimo secolo*. Roma 2010 (Storia 57); P. Delogu: *The Popes and their Town in the Time of Charlemagne*. In: J. Mitchell/J. Moreland/B. Leal (eds.): *Encounters, Excavations and Argosies: Essays for Richard Hodges*. Oxford 2017, pp. 105–115.

2 E. g. H. Dey: *The Making of Medieval Rome. A New Profile of the City, 400–1420*. Cambridge 2021.

3 For the magnificent associated catalogue realised under the direction of Marina Righetti and Anna Maria D'Achille, see the review at Plekos 25, 2023, pp. 23–38: https://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2023/r-roma_medievale.pdf.

images consisting of plans and reconstructions. The detailed and full table of contents (pp. 5–7) is followed by a pellucid preface setting forth the goals and limits of this book (p. 9) and a brief note of thanks that usefully identifies those with whom the author discussed ideas (p. 10). Then comes the main body of text, consisting of four chapters divided into seventy-three sections (pp. 11–402), with a chapter for each of the four centuries covered by this book. The book concludes with a bibliography arranged by theme (pp. 403–426) and a brief index to help readers locate the principal discussions of the key monuments discussed (p. 427).⁴

The first chapter (“Il secolo VI” = pp. 11–58) sets the stage by providing background information and a narrative synthesis of the events of a century that, on many counts, might be deemed catastrophic for the city of Rome.⁵ The emphasis is on what followed the Justinianic reconquest of Italy, and a focus upon the material remains of the church of S. Maria Antiqua and the workshop in the *Athenaeum* of Hadrian enables readers to envision what this change in political destiny meant in tangible terms. The second chapter (“Il secolo VII” = pp. 59–141) covers the period between the death of Gregory the Great (604) and the election of John VII (705), furnishing a detailed, analytical account of medieval Rome as the city emerged from the upheavals and uncertainty of the previous century. Not all attention is devoted to Monothelitism and its repercussions. For instance, the dress and food of seventh-century Romans (e. g. buttons apparently of local manufacture, olive oil from north Africa, and wine from the Aegean, Anatolia, and Levant) are illustrated by the evidence brought to light by excavation of the *Crypta Balbi*. The third chapter (“Il secolo VIII” = pp. 143–271) follows the events that produced a major tectonic shift in the political landscape of the Mediterranean. From a relatively isolated, beleaguered outpost of the Byzantine empire in the West, Rome under papal leadership became a key player in the contests for political and ecclesiastical power in Carolingian Europe. Again, however, attention is also devoted to the experience of daily life in Rome, e. g. the functions of *diaconiae*, the degree of the Roman economy’s monetisation, and the itineraries of the *Codex Einsidlensis* 326. The fourth chapter (“Il secolo IX” = pp. 273–402) traces the vicissitudes of Rome as the papacy continually negotiated anew its relationship with the rulers of the Carolingian

4 For the table of contents, readers are referred to the end of this review.

5 Cf. p. 39: “una catastrofica piena del Tevere”.

dynasty. However, rejecting the label of “Carolingian Rome” for this epoch and its history (p. 275), Delogu justly observes that the developments and rebirth of the city in a new guise are due to local forces at work, rather than deriving their origins from the Frankish realm(s) to the north of the Alps. From the contested election of pope Leo III in 795 to the earthquake that devastated the city in 897 under the pontificate of Theodore II, things such as the creation of a fortification wall about the Vatican and the changing texture of the *Liber Pontificalis* are evoked to illustrate what this meant.

In the best tradition of historical writing, the descriptions of persons, places, and events are meticulously detailed, vividly evoking the past much like Hercule Poirot reconstructing the scene of the crime. Writing in an understated, highly readable style, Delogu evokes a world that has by and large been lost, thanks to the later re-elaboration of the urban landscape during the sixteenth to seventeenth and twentieth centuries. He deftly interweaves the description and analysis of material and visual culture with the historian’s traditional concern for politics and religion and a twentieth-century interest in society and economy. The resulting book is rich in texture, brimming with fascinating material and offering much food for thought. Although eschewing the impossible goal of being all-encompassing, this history manages to distill the essence of decades of reflection on early medieval history and offers a critical, up-to-date assessment of the scholarship. In short, it provides a new, revolutionary perspective on the city of Rome between the mid-sixth century and the closing years of the ninth.

It is therefore to be regretted that certain editorial decisions have rendered this admirable text far less accessible and useful than it might otherwise have been. Perhaps most annoying (at least for those without a photographic memory or a PDF copy to hand) is the lack of a genuine index that would allow the reader to check on what Delogu says about Turtura (p. 111) or what he fails to say about pope Silverius (p. 14).⁶ Similarly, the overall lack of illustrations (i. e. maps, plans, reconstructions, and photographs) means that the reader must constantly be consulting other works in order to see what Delogu discusses or mentions. Third, notwithstanding the fact that the author is clearly *au courant*, there are some rather surprising omissions from

6 Cf. Dey (note 2), p. 277 n. 33 (citing Lib. pontif. 1.296 Duchesne), where notice is taken of the fact that Vigilius is the first pope known to be of senatorial descent. It would have been equally useful to see reference to the report of the *Liber Pontificalis* that Silverius was himself the son of a previous pope, Hormisdas.

the bibliography. It is very good to see the invaluable contributions of Lucia Saguì, Alessia Rovelli, and Delogu himself cited properly in the bibliography, but one would have also expected citation of the work of Silvia Orlandi, Andrea Giardina, and Umberto Roberto.⁷ One gets the impression that we are dealing with a *faida* internal to the Sapienza Università di Roma. That is a pity. Fourth and last, as is typical of many ‘popularising’ historians, Delogu very rarely quotes the sources – allowing them to speak in their own voices – but instead paraphrases them. That, too, is a pity as it lessens the impact of their testimony and blunts the potential for dramatic force and incisive analysis that the narrative might have had. As an example, the reviewer cites an overlooked episode that took place at the monastery of the Cilician monks *Ad Aquas Salvias* between 1 October and 1 November 713. The episode in question is the exorcism of the daughter of a refugee Syrian bishop who had taken up residence in Rome and committed his daughter to the care of the monastery of St. Cassian near S. Lorenzo fuori le mura.⁸ Possessed by a demon thanks to the curse of a spurned Roman suitor (who had engaged the services of a sorcerer during a sojourn in Sicily), the young woman screamed a torrent of abuse at those undertaking to save her, including more

7 Amongst contributions that one might have expected to see cited: S. Orlandi: *Epigrafia anfiteatrale dell’Occidente romano*. Vol. 6: Roma. Anfiteatri e strutture annesse con una nuova edizione e commento delle iscrizioni del Colosseo. Roma 2004 (*Vetera* 15); A. Giardina/G. A. Cecconi/I. Tantillo (eds.): *Cassiodoro: Varie*. 5 vols. Roma 2014–2023; U. Roberto: *Roma capta. Il sacco della città dai Galli ai Lanzichenechi*. Bari 2012 (*Storia e società*). It is to be added that occasionally there are also other works that might have been properly exploited, e. g. L. Bosman/I. Haynes/P. Liverani (eds.): *The Basilica of Saint John Lateran to 1600*. Cambridge 2020 (*British School at Rome Studies*).

8 For critical editions and translations of the texts describing this episode, see: B. Flusin: *Saint Anastase le Perse et l’histoire de la Palestine au début du VIIe siècle*. 2 vols. Paris 1992 (*Le monde byzantin*); C. Franklin: *The Latin dossier of Anastasius the Persian. Hagiographic Translations and Transformations*. Toronto 2004 (*Studies and Texts* 147). The episode is quite rightly highlighted in the standard narrative history of this period: P. Llewellyn: *Rome in the Dark Ages*. London 1971, pp. 164–165. For the monastic milieu within which this episode took place, see: J.-M. Sauter: *Les moines grecs et orientaux à Rome aux époques byzantine et carolingienne (milieu du VIe siècle–fin du IXe siècle)*. 2 vols. Bruxelles 1983 (*Académie royale de Belgique. Mémoires de la classe des lettres* 66.1); G. Ferrari: *Early Roman Monasteries. Notes for the History of the Monasteries and Convents at Rome from the Vth through the Xth century*. Città del Vaticano 1957 (*Studi di antichità cristiana* 23).

than one topical reference to the current political situation (Chapter 5 of *BHG* 89; cf. *BHL* 412):

Why in the world did you bring me to this eater of dogs Anastasius? He was mine, but he gave up his body to tortures for the sake of the Nazarene. He will not be able to drive me out of here, for I am an emperor and I have a crown and I possess serried ranks of soldiers and exalted ministers, and there is no one who will be able to cast me out of this body.

The struggle for control of one adolescent girl's body was emblematic of a wider struggle for power throughout the whole of the Mediterranean world, from Constantinople to Spain. Christ and his representatives in Rome, St. Peter and St. Anastasius the Persian, properly invoked and honoured, restored cosmic order. To forget such stories is to lose memorable pages from the scrapbook that documents how we came to be who we are today.

* * *

This is a dense, thoughtful book that will be of interest and value to colleagues and students and appeal to the general public. It offers a detailed and up-to-date review of our knowledge of city during the sixth to ninth centuries. Accordingly, Delogu is to be felicitated upon a timely and congenial contribution to the field, and one that may nicely serve as a capstone to a distinguished career. So, too, the publishers are to be congratulated upon an outstanding job of production. This is a book that, as a material artefact, it is a genuine pleasure to hold and to use, printed with signature-sewn half-quires and beautiful paper, and it is one that readers will happily return to on many an occasion. Italian craftsmanship distinguishes itself.

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

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