Julia Hoffmann-Salz / Matthäus Heil / Holger Wienholz (eds.): The Eastern Roman Empire under the Severans. Old Connections, New Beginnings? Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2024. 367 pp., 19 ill., 2 maps, 4 tables, 1 plan. € 95.00. ISBN: 978-3-525-30251-4.

The volume, descending from a digital conference sponsored by the Freie Universität Berlin in 2022, presents a diverse collection of essays on various aspects of the Severan regime's management of their most eastern provinces. Topics include the management of the relationship between cities and emperors, the Severan consciousness and support for Roman traditions, the evolution of the eastern frontier in the face of the emergence of the Sasanian regime, and the question of whether there was a discernable difference in patterns of administrative behaviour between Severans and their Antonine predecessors.

The issue of how provincial communities managed the Severans is treated in essays by Ziad Sawaya ("The Relations Between the Severan Emperors and the Cities of Phoenicia: Evidence for Imperial Privileges and Retribution", pp. 83–114), Holger Wienholz ("Severische Bauprojekte bei Iohannes Malalas", pp. 115–125), Hadrien Bru ("Les Sévères en Phrygie Parorée et en Pisidie", pp. 181–204) and Giorgos Mitropoulos ("The Severan Dynasty and Greece: New Beginnings, Old Connections", pp. 255–277) on the cities of Phoenicia, Severan building projects, Phrygia and Pisidia and Greece, with a more wide-ranging piece by Babett Edelmann-Singer ("Nothing New in the East? The Severan Emperors and the Provincial Elite in the Eastern Roman Empire", pp. 205–223) on the dynasty's relationship with eastern elites. These essays present a consistent pattern of elites manipulating the imperial regime to attain local advantage, which raises questions about how the petition and response style of government shaped a dialogue through which elites looked to manipulate the imperial government to their own ends and, in some cases, undo errors that they had made, or had forced upon them during the civil wars. As Edelmann-Singer writes, the various crises of the Severan period "forced [...] provincials to position themselves in order to make the most of their room for manœuvering" (p. 220).

Thoughtful essays by Julia Hoffmann-Salz ("Emesa and Arca as Imperial *patriae* under the Severans", pp. 47–82) and Susann S. Lusnia ("West Meets East? Assessing Eastern Influences in the Art and Architecture of Severan Rome", pp. 337–349) treat the issue of "eastern influence" shaping

imperial policy in the Severan age as a whole. Hoffmann-Salz looks at Emesa and Acre as imperial *patriae*, showing that literary sources for Elagabalus and Severus Alexander "responded to topics offered by their subject's self-presentation" (p. 77), while historians in the post-Severan period would stress the dynasty's provincial origin, presenting its members as outsiders and denying the validity of the centerpiece of the regime's propaganda, continuity with the Antonine "'golden age'" (p. 78). Contrary to the claims of later writers about the regime's "eastern" aspect, Lusnia points out that it is "difficult to point to clear examples" of eastern influence in the architectural regime of Severus and Caracalla and that while Elagabalus caused a stir by bringing his god with him from Emesa, "it remains difficult to identify any [...] architecture or artistic features that are specifically Syrian or Eastern" (p. 346) among his works, while further noting that as Severus came to the throne as a usurper, he needed to appeal to the established Roman elite (p. 347). A similar point emerges from Riccardo Bertolazzi's essay on three inscriptions from Lower Moesia and Thrace honouring Julia Domna and Julia Maesa as the "Fortune of the inhabited world" and Julia Soaemias as its mistress ("The Severan Augustae as Mistresses of the World", pp. 239–254). The language, while well attested in the case of emperors from the reign of Trajan onwards, is unusual for a female member of the imperial house, which leads Bertolazzi to conclude, quite reasonably, that this represents a perception of these women's power as witnessed by provincials who had seen them accompanying their sons on journeys to the eastern provinces.

Returning to Severus, Simon Lentzsch notes that the emperor seems to have had a genuine interest in the great generals of the past as is reflected in his enhancement of Hannibal's tomb ("In the Footsteps of the Past – the Severans and the Tomb of Hannibal", pp. 225–238). Lentzsch repudiates Alfred von Domaszewski's claim that this foreshadowed Severus' desire to unleash the spirit of the provinces against Rome[1] by showing how Severus' treatment of Hannibal fits in with a pattern of the emperor's historical tourism, for example visits to the tombs of great leaders including Gnaeus Pompey, and his ban on people visiting the tomb of Alexander once he had been there. Lentzsch's observations on Severus' historical interests might have been extended to include the rather curious vision of Rome's history in

1 A. von Domaszewski: Geschichte der römischen Kaiser. Vol. 2. 2nd edition. Leipzig 1914, p. 228.

Cassius Dio where Severus presented himself as a later day Sulla (Cass. Dio 76.8.1–4).

The reign of Alexander Severus saw a fundamental shift in Rome's ability to control its eastern frontier once Ardashir had ousted Artabanus. A series of excellent essays by Udo Hartmann ("Palmyra unter den Severern", pp. 127–161), Ann-Christine Sander ["How to Police Rome's Desert Frontier (under Severan Rule) – an Alternative Narration of Tadmur-Palmyra's Desert Police", pp. 163–180], Frank Schleicher ("Armenien und der Südkaukasus in severischer Zeit – historiographische Tradition und politische Bedeutung", pp. 279–308), Giusto Traina ("Trdat, King of Greater Armenia in the Early Third Century", pp. 309–315) and Lucinda Dirven ("Septimius Severus at Hatra: Old Tactics and New Beginnings", pp. 317–336) treat the transformation of Palymra (Hartmann and Sander), the northeastern frontier in the southern Caucusus and Armenia (Schleicher and Traina) and Hatra (Dirven). Hartmann shows how Palmyra was transformed from a long-distance trading metropolis to a Roman colonia whose elite was increasingly connected to Rome, laying the foundation for the city's moment of greatness in the 260s and 270s. He points out that the city's leading citizens, now fully integrated into the political and military structures of the empire, identified as members of the imperial elite while the declining importance of long-distance trade in the middle of the third century led Palmyrenes to focus increasingly on opportunities for political advancement in imperial service. In exploring the new frontiers of the Palmyrene elite, Hartmann also administers a useful reading of IGLS XVII.l, 53, showing that Alexander Severus' appearance in the city during 232 had nothing directly to do with his campaign against Ardashir, but rather was a stop on his way to suppress the mutinies that had broken out in Oshroene in the wake of Ardashir's first attacks (pp. 144–152). Sander offers an important supplement to Hartmann's argument by pointing out that Palmyra's "polymorphic" (p. 164) society, which combined nomadic, semi-nomadic and urban elements, created a special situation that led the Severans to promote members of the elite with demonstrated military ability and capacity to mobilize forces throughout the Euphrates region. The "polymorphic" social model for desert communities is also employed by Dirven in her excellent study of Hatra's resistance to Severus, which succeeded in large part because of attacks on the Roman supply line by lightly armed guerillas from desert communities (pp. 317–332). These essays make it clear that states on the desert

boundaries of the two empires had uniquely effective military forces in the early third century.

Moving to the north, Traina offers a careful investigation of the career of Trdat, king of Armenia in the late Severan period, a person whose dealings with Rome as Persia transitioned from Arsacid to Sasanian leadership are variously reported in western and Armenian sources. For Cassius Dio Trdat was the king of Armenia whom Caracalla forced to flee to Parthia only to be restored to the Armenian throne through the treaty which ended the conflict between Macrinus and Artabanus in 218. It subsequently becomes very difficult to know what happened, as we have to rely on Armenian traditions which are prone to fancy and provide no useful information, a point which Schleicher also notes while observing that any Roman intervention in Armenia against the Sasanians most likely took place under Severus Alexander, a period in which, as he observes, the Romans were not exactly Armenia's best allies (pp. 296–297). One reason for this, Schleicher argues, is that, under the Severans, Roman assaults on the Arsacids no longer went through Mesopotamia and southern Armenia, but – perhaps facilitated by an economically developed and well-fortified Dura-Europos – along the Euphrates. As a result the Severan emperors did not regard the effort of controlling the Caucasus as being worthwhile. Instead they would be content with formal recognition of Roman suzerainty, and while they were more cautious on the Black Sea coast, the Severans abandoned a direct military presence as the princes of the inland tribes were given the functions of client rulers (pp. 302–303).

The Roman army is the subject of Werner Eck's paper, which draws heavily upon his work with Roman military *diplomata* ("Die Severer und das Militär im Spiegel der *diplomata militaria*", pp. 351–364). He shows that, in the main, there were hardly any significant changes in the Roman military or its internal organization, at least as far as they can be reflected in *diplomata*. What does appear, however, a result of the praetorian guard's support for Didius Julianus, is that throughout this period, Italy ceased to be a reservoir for replenishing the army, and the guard in particular. The replacement of the inhabitants of Italy by provincials in what was still the heartland of empire foreshadows the Dioclectianic equation of Italy with the provinces (p. 362).

Eck's handling of earlier scholarship is notably respectful (and especially noticeable given his own exceptional record). Hence it may appear that his footnote 12 (p. 352), observing that Anthony R. Birley's "Septimius Severus.

The African Emperor"[2] is still the best book on the subject, tacitly responds to the very different style of scholarship in Matthäus Heil's contribution on "the Syrian empresses" ("Die syrische Kaiserin: Ein Schlagwort und seine Abgründe", pp. 27–46). In their introduction (Julia Hoffmann-Salz/Matthäus Heil/Holger Wienholz: "The Eastern Roman Empire under the Severans – Old Connections, New Beginnings?", pp. 9–26) the editors state that they are interested in exploring whether "the developments in the Eastern Roman Empire" were "truly determined by the geographical origin of parts of the dynasty" or if focus on this issue hinders "more expedient analysis of cause and effect of Severan measures in the east" (p. 19). As noted above, Hoffmann-Salz explores the Syrian image of the Severans through her astute reading of the sources. Heil's approach is essentially to accuse modern scholars, in particular Barbara Levick,[3] of supporting racist analyses of imperial history that date back to the nineteenth century. He offers a reading of the overtly racist aspects of von Domaszewski's history of Rome that shows similarities with the thinking of German anti-semites of the nineteenth century (p. 40) and implies that in consulting von Domaszewski's work, Levick (and Birley) had become heirs to a long-standing tradition whose implications they themselves probably did not overlook. As a point of fact this is simply wrong. A person who reads Levick's book to the end will find that she explicitly criticizes this tradition.[4] The same reader might also wonder why Heil appears uninterested in the ongoing impact of Otto Seeck's theory that the fall of the Roman empire was due to the 'extermination of the best.'

Heil's contribution aside, the volume presents a series of valuable essays which treat the issue of cultural interaction with sophistication and allow for a better understanding of the interaction of the Severan house with the eastern regions of their domain. The essays on the eastern frontier further provide important insight into the tensions which accompanied the arrival of the Sasanians as rulers of Persia. The overall quality of the scholarship in the volume is impressive.

2 A. R. Birley: Septimius Severus. The African Emperor. New Haven, CT/London 1988.

3 On the basis of her book, B. Levick: Julia Domna. Syrian Empress. London/New York 2007 (Women of the Ancient World).

4 Levick (n. 3), p. 193.

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