

Book Review

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BOOK REVIEWED: PETER HEATHER, *THE RESTORATION OF ROME: BARBARIAN POPES & IMPERIAL PRETENDERS* (LONDON: MACMILLAN, 2013), XVIII + 470 PP. ISBN: 9780230700154.

This recent publication by Peter Heather is in a sense another instalment of what has now become a trilogy (together with *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and *Empires and Barbarians*) on the late Roman Empire and the early medieval West. This time Heather focuses on a long and interesting period that lasts from 476 to 1215, which has rarely been studied in a single work. Instead of using traditional periodizations of Late Antiquity, early and high Middle ages, the present work traces the influence the ghost of the Roman Empire had on the western European landscape throughout this long stretch of time. The book is involved with how the former Roman Empire managed to fascinate secular and ecclesiastical factors of power in several ways, orientating them towards a vision of *renovatio*, the dream of a 'restored Rome' – something that was attempted many times during this period, both physically and metaphorically. *The Restoration of Rome* is founded on four pillars, all of them claimers of the late Roman legacy: Theodoric, Justinian, Charlemagne and the papacy. In an age of rapid political change and reshaping borders, the concept of the Roman Empire survived and was revived.

The first part of the book is dedicated to Theodoric and his activities in Italy (493-526), describing a regime that was mentally under Roman dominance. Heather analyses Theodoric's letter to Emperor Anastasius I in order to highlight the new model of Gothic *Romanitas* that the Ostrogothic king wished to promote (p. 3). Additionally, he uses the *Getica* of Jordanes to trace the elements of Gothic

political theology. The recounting of Theodoric's complex and careful policies reveals his imperial ambitions and his capability to modify the concept of the *Romanitas* so that he might incorporate himself and his fragile kingdom into the Christian Roman Cosmo theory. Indeed, by the year 507, he was in the most favourable position in the Mediterranean, ruling from the old core of the *Romanitas*, expanding his influence in the Western Mediterranean by marriage alliances or by patronising the Visigothic Kingdom during one of its most turbulent times after the battle of Vouillé (507) and the death of Alaric II. The same year, the panegyric of Ennodius celebrated his successes in a most Roman manner.

Heather also emphasises Theodoric's strategy of compromise between the interests of the old Italian nobility and the new Ostrogothic elite as well as his commitment to the continuation of Roman Law, which was crucial for the balance and the peace of his realm. The benefits of this stability were obvious; a significant part of the Roman aristocracy participated actively in the recently established court and contributed to the emergence of dialectic of Gothic *Romanitas*. Heather further explores the problematic last years of Theodoric's reign and presents the ideological division of the Italian landowning class between Pro-(East) Roman and Pro-Gothic groups, revealing two different directions of political orientation and a question of the *de facto* legitimacy of the Ostrogothic state, something that was a prelude to the Roman (re)conquest a few decades later. He evaluates the success of the Gothic experiment and points out that despite its brief duration, Theodoric proved to be a worthy opponent (in comparison to the Vandal state, for instance) of Justinian's armies.

In the second part of his book, Heather deals with the ambitious plans of Justinian and their effects in the Mediterranean world in the long term. Despite the abundance of works dealing with his reign, Justinian remains a highly enigmatic and controversial figure. Heather questions his legacy and emphasises the emperor's attempts to stabilise and legitimise his authority during the first part of his reign, which to some extent explains his westward expeditions and their brief benefits. However, he mentions that the one actual success of Justinian was the establishment of permanent Byzantine presence in southern Italy until the middle of the eleventh century. Surprisingly, there is no mention of Justinian's Spanish expedition or the effects of this expedition on the Spanish peninsula and Visigothic politics – something that should not be underestimated.

Heather re-evaluates the conclusions that historians had come to during the previous century on the identity of the Gothic and Vandal kingdoms, the issue of self-identification of their subjects and their rapid collapse, examining the effects of the wars that finally marked the end of an era. The evidence from the late Roman economy and demography contributes to an image of collapse and a violent transition (at least for some regions) from Late Antiquity to the early Middle Ages: the combination of over-taxation, the coming of the *magna mortalitas* in the 540s and the climatic instability also had a share in the calamities of the sixth century. The Empire lost two thirds of its revenue and the urban population severely declined. Almost a century later, the ideological impact of this period of depression was more than evident: the privileged position of the *Romanitas* in God's plan appeared to

be rather hollow and the Eastern Roman Empire had been transformed into a regional Greek kingdom. To what extent Justinian's legacy (and the inability of his successors to defend it) was responsible for all that is still an open debate. It is remarkable however, that there is no mention of the activities of the emperor Constans II in Italy during the years 663-668 which made him the first Roman emperor to visit Rome after the collapse of the Western Empire, and the last to set foot ever since on Italian soil and try to defend the (Eastern) Roman legacy.

The next milestone in the attempt at the *Restoration of Rome* is Charlemagne and the Frankish saga of the eighth and ninth centuries. The Merovingian divisions and conflicts had prevented the Franks from claiming an imperial legacy despite the fact that they had the might to do so in the sixth century. However, the emergence of regional nobilities re-organised the networks of power in the seventh and early eighth centuries. Heather provides a detailed narrative of the Pippinid conflicts and their rise to prominence through successful building of political relationships and effective military command. He also portrays the gradual tightening of the bonds between the Franks and the Papacy from the 750s onwards, and discusses the significance of the *Donatio Constantini* for the idea of a Frankish Empire and the emergence of the *Patrimonium Sancti Petri*, the birth of Papal States. It was the beginning of a mutually beneficial relationship. Heather then enters the debate on whether or not Charlemagne really had intentions to link his Frankish Empire with the legacy of Rome. He comments on Einhard's description of Charlemagne's unwillingness to be crowned emperor on Christmas day in 800 as well as the dogmatic controversy with the East on the icons in an attempt to prove that the Byzantine court had not had the monopoly on divine providence. He also questions the actual content of negotiations between Charlemagne and Leo III at Paderborn (799) and the dilemma of the Frankish king to claim an inheritance that had little to do with the Frankish destiny.

A generation later, the dynastic struggles and the fragmentation of authority and land contributed to the end of the Carolingian line in both East and West Francia. The Ottonians managed to set up a new imperial destiny but in a rather limited space in comparison to their predecessors. By the end of the first millennium, it was more than clear that all experiments of imperial revival had failed. The success of Rome could not be repeated. The Mediterranean world and Western Europe had no more sufficient resources and manpower for an achievement of the same scale. The fragmentation of the old *mare nostrum* with the rise and expansion of Islam and the development of new political entities in eastern and central Europe managed to change permanently the old economic and demographic balance. The Slavic world was transformed politically and economically by its contact with the Holy Roman Empire; similarly, the Germanic world witnessed an evolution during the process of osmosis with the *Orbis Romanus*.

Heather concludes that the only form in which the Empire was revived was the religious one, and he turns his attention to this last and most significant revival in the remaining part of this book. Already in the seventh century, Pope Gregory II (715-731) refused to pay taxes on behalf of Rome to the Byzantine emperor Leo III. This act of defiance signifies the *de facto* birth of the Papal State. Even before that, the Roman pontifex was not only a religious leader but he also managed secular matters in a manner similar to that of a late Roman *consul* or a *praefectus urbi*. Therefore, the

emergence of the Republic of St Peter was more like a symbolic and typical upgrade of status rather than an innovation. As Heather convincingly argues with carefully laid out examples, the popes of Rome finally succeeded where Roman emperors, their pretenders, and imitators had failed. Heather approaches this entire period through a wide variety of sources and his easy-to-follow narrative makes the subject accessible to a wider audience than those of specialists. His talent and humour carves a vivid account that makes any distant event appear familiar and comprehensible to the reader.