

Book Review

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BOOK REVIEWED: MEAGHAN A. MCEVOY, *CHILD EMPEROR RULE IN THE LATE ROMAN WEST, AD 367-455*, OXFORD CLASSICAL MONOGRAPHS (OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013), XI + 317 PP. ISBN: 978-0199664818

This study is based on Meaghan A. McEvoy's 2009 Oxford PhD thesis. Sometimes theses or dissertations turned into monographs can be a hard slog for both the scholarly and the non-scholarly reader. Happily, this is not the case here. Immaculately researched, excitingly paced, and well written, I found myself racing through chapters to find her views on a period, the fifth century, that has only recently received some much needed attention.

McEvoy traces the increasing prevalence of child emperors from the accession of Gratian in 367 to the assassination of the Western emperor Valentinian III in 455. A real life *Game of Thrones*, the narrative comes to life under McEvoy's skilled guidance. One can only applaud her engagement with the newer revisionist studies. Her views constantly interact with this recent scholarship, however this discussion is left largely to the footnotes for those who are interested. Her adept use of narrative (a method out of favour amongst many scholars, but employed adroitly here) allows McEvoy to both keep the reader engaged and help those not familiar with the period to understand the complex rivalries that marked the age. This is quite an achievement considering that in comparison to the fourth and the sixth, the fifth-century sources left to us are often incomplete or untrustworthy.

McEvoy explains in the introduction why the traditional scholarly description of these 'regimes' as regencies is flawed. She points out that the ancient Romans had never used the concept in the modern legal sense, suggesting, I believe correctly, that we should see the leading generalissimos from

the fifth century like Stilicho as ‘guardians’ or ‘managers’. McEvoy also rightly adheres to the prevailing view found in recent scholarship that sees the internal rivalries which beset both halves of the Empire in the fourth and the fifth centuries as largely factional, rather than ethnic disputes between Romans and non-Romans.

Chapter 1 sets out the traditional role of the emperor as both a political and a military ruler. McEvoy finds that the deeply rooted Hellenic virtues of courage in battle, justice in politics and calm majesty in the face of defeat helped to define notions of ideal rulership. Following concepts found in Plato’s descriptions of the ideal philosopher-king, a model late Roman emperor needed to be both a lover of reason and a lover of war. Efficiently juxtaposing these expected political and military virtues allowed the emperor to become an exemplar of ideal rulership.

In Chapter 2, McEvoy looks at the political circumstances surrounding the accessions of the child-emperors Gratian and Valentinian II. After Valentinian I’s sudden death in November 375, political circumstance caused men like the Frankish general Merobaudes (she is unsure whether Merobaudes’ non-Roman lineage prevented him from taking the purple himself) to throw their support behind the young child-emperors. To borrow McEvoy’s words, ‘the original accessions of Gratian and Valentinian II were the result of the activity of others, rather than their own efforts’ (p. 55). Despite their determination, and Gratian’s apparent martial capabilities as he grew into adulthood, these original fourth-century child-emperors, in McEvoy’s mind, remained pawns of fourth-century political players from the West and the East.

The next chapter describes Gratian’s attempts to break-free from the limitations of child-rule. Gratian’s military campaigns reveal that he was trying to stick to the traditional path of a martial emperor. According to McEvoy, Gallic interests and Gratian’s attempts to establish his own Alan military supporters caused his powerful advisors to turn against him, and as she states, ‘this importing and favouring of foreign soldiers also revealed Gratian’s lack of understanding of how to maintain the support of existing power-players within his military’ (p. 85). This led to the usurpation of Magnus Maximus and Gratian’s death during a futile attempt to destroy the usurper. The death of Gratian led to his support flowing to the even weaker Valentinian II. Once again, McEvoy asserts that self-interest motivated many of the boy-emperor’s supporters. Whilst recognising Valentinian II in his struggle against Magnus Maximus, the Eastern emperor – Theodosius I – at first left his Western counterpart to try and sort out his own affairs. As McEvoy points out, the Eastern emperor had his own troubles trying to help the Eastern half of the Empire recover after disastrous defeat at the hands of the Goths in 378. Theodosius perceived Valentinian II to be more of a nuisance than a threat or rival. While he saw benefits in playing the two Western emperors off against each other, he made it clear that he was the ‘true’ emperor. As McEvoy explains, ‘Theodosius’ marginalization of Valentinian left the young emperor appearing weak, isolated, and ultimately vulnerable – Magnus Maximus would not be the last opportunist to take advantage of the situation’ (p. 93). Ultimately marginalised to the point of despair, Valentinian killed himself, rather than take the bullying of his barbarian henchman Arbogast.

Chapter 4 explores how the imperial image was adjusted to best suit child-emperors. As McEvoy explains, the increasing emphasis on the ceremonial and religious role of emperors in the increasingly Christian Roman Empire of the later fourth and fifth centuries played a part in creating an emperor who largely eschewed military affairs. These duties were left to those best able to command, their loyal generalissimos. Separating these vital and time-consuming civilian and military roles thus made some sense. Indeed, between Theodosius I at the close of the fourth century and Heraclius in the seventh century, no Roman emperor led his army into battle personally, though I must point out that the soldier emperors of the fifth and sixth centuries played a more active role in military planning than these child-emperors. Following the well-trodden path of Kenneth Holum, McEvoy suggests that non-martial emperors naturally emphasised non-martial virtues like piety as imperial virtues (*Theodosian Empresses: Women and Dominion in Late Antiquity* [Berkeley, 1982], p. 50). Though I would add, and indeed McEvoy points out later in Chapter 8, Theodosius II presented himself as the face of Roman victory, a role that the non-campaigning Justinian would master in the next century. Furthermore, recent examinations of the literary and visual sources that have survived from the reign of Constantius II (ruled 337-361) reveal that an imperial reliance on Christian virtues and imagery as an essential aspect of imperial propaganda and an emperor's self-presentation was not a Theodosian innovation. As Michael Whitby has recently argued, Constantius II deftly balanced his military role with Christian engagement (see, for example, his 'Images of Constantius', in *The Late Roman World and its Historian: Interpreting Ammianus Marcellinus*, eds. Jan Willem Drijvers and David Hunt [New York, 1999], pp. 77-92).

The second half of the study is the strongest. McEvoy's retelling (Chapters 5 to 10) of Honorius' crucial reign and detailed revisionist account of Valentinian III's regime – especially this emperor's shifting relationship with the generalissimo Aetius – represented highlights for me. McEvoy's portrayal of Valentinian vainly trying to assert his right to rule in his own right as an adult emperor is sympathetic and convincing. Less satisfying, however, is the fact that McEvoy does not make more of the contrast with the Eastern emperor Leo I's successful assassination of his own mentor-generalissimo Aspar in 471, although I recognise that this study is focused primarily on the West.

McEvoy is certainly correct however, when she emphasises that the fifth century saw an increase in both the danger and the allure of successful soldiers. Interesting contrasts can be made with Myles McDonnell's recent study on *virtus* in the Roman Republic and Early Empire, where McDonnell shows how the republican Roman aristocracy, and then the early Roman Emperors sought to contain the martial manliness, and more specifically, the manly *virtus* of their generalissimos (*Roman Manliness: Virtus and the Roman Republic* [Cambridge, 2007]). Much like the era of the republic (e.g. Marius, Sulla), new men (e.g. Aetius, Boniface, Aspar, Ricimer) in the fifth century garbed in manly martial virtues could be perceived as both saviours and threats to the State. Whilst, as McDonnell suggests, the early emperors had taken steps to curb this threat, McEvoy's study shows that it became a problem once again for the twin regimes of the fifth century.

Recent scholarship has provided some possible reasons for why even soldier-emperors gave up their important military role: the circumstances of succession, the threat of death on campaign as experienced by Valens and Julian in the fourth century, internal court politics, and the age of the soldier-emperors when they obtained the purple (in particular see, A. D. Lee, *War in Late Antiquity, A Social History* [Oxford, 2007], p. 35). As McEvoy points out, there was a certain amount of safety for these non-campaigning child-emperors. It is probably no coincidence that Honorius (ruled 395-423), Theodosius II (ruled 408-50), and Valentinian III (ruled 425-455) were some of the longest serving emperors. Moreover, military defeats could be blamed on a campaign's general, whilst as the Probus diptych reveals, an emperor could continue to bask in the glory of a victory.

As McEvoy shows so vividly throughout the study, powerful generalissimos like Stilicho, Boniface, Felix, and Aetius had all been consumed by the incessant rivalries that marked the age; therefore being a *magister militum* was more dangerous than being an emperor (p. 193). So why did these generalissimos not just take the purple? McEvoy discounts the traditional notion that 'a strong feeling for dynastic loyalty' motivated these generals (p. 217). She posits, reasonably enough, that they appreciated the power they held under child-emperors (p. 249). Certainly, men like Stilicho, Ricimer, Aetius, and Aspar in the East, seemed content ruling behind the scenes, though Stilicho and Aetius appeared to have had hopes for their sons to become emperors. Moreover, if Olympiodorus is to be believed, Constantius III had only grudgingly taken on the role as partner to Honorius. Unquestionably, the position seems to have lost some of its allure, at least in the West. Perhaps giving up direct command of Roman forces on the ground also played a role? So too as McEvoy asserts, did these men have a genuine desire to avoid civil wars that tended to be disastrous for the Empire, and in turn, their interests (p. 314). The power held by these generalissimos, as McEvoy explains (e.g., p. 312), was never absolute. Theodosius II's continuing interest in Western affairs tended to curb these military men's influence. They needed to be wary of rivals within the Western military as well. As McEvoy wisely highlights, it is interesting and important to note that the 'non-martial' Valentinian commits the murder of Aetius himself.

One finds a succinct summation of the study with McEvoy's assertion that 'as long as the emperor remained passive –content, effectively, to remain a child– it did function' but when a child emperor like Valentinian III tried to establish himself as an adult ruler, the system broke down (p. 301). The example of Theodosius II, however, upsets her model somewhat. Her Theodosius, indeed, is a much more powerful figure than I have seen in any other modern literature. More needed to be said about this seminal, albeit Eastern child-emperor.

Moreover, her closing contention that child-emperors were 'to become common in the following centuries' in the Byzantine Empire is not true at the end of the fifth to the early seventh centuries. A closer look at the evidence provides a rather different conclusion. After the assassination of Valentinian III a long series of adult-emperors took on the purple in the West: Maximus, Avitus, Majorian, Severus, Anthemios, Olybrius, and Nepos. While famously the last Western emperor Romulus Augustus was a child emperor, as we can see from the list above, he represents the exception rather

than the rule. Moreover, fifth-century Eastern emperors, Marcian, Leo (Leo II died as a child), Zeno, and Basiliskos were all soldiers, while Anastasios was an obscure palace official. In the sixth and the seventh centuries, Justin, Justinian, Maurice, Phokas, and Heraclius had all begun their rise to the purple as soldiers. Therefore, we can see clearly that these Theodosian child-emperors did not set as influential a long-term precedent as McEvoy concludes (e.g. p. 327). Non-child emperors are certainly far more prevalent in Byzantine history.

A chapter that dealt with the East and the West shortly after the Theodosian rulers would have added to the study and to the overall thesis. So I remain unconvinced that there was a long-term shift in the imperial system in favour of child-emperors. Dynastic sentiment, and, indeed, historical accident still present a more attractive explanation for the number of child-emperors from 367-455. Dynastic considerations certainly were at play when the Eastern emperor Marcian (ruled 450-57) married Theodosius II's sister Aelia Pulcheria (For this view of Leo's ascension, see, for example, R. W. Burgess, 'The Accession of Marcian in the Light of Chalcedonian Apologetic and Monophysite Polemic', *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, 86-87 [1993-1994]: 47-68). Once this sentiment faded, it became easier for Aspar to do away with the Theodosian line when he then chose the soldier Leo I as Marcian's replacement.

Yet, despite remaining unconvinced of her overriding thesis, this is an important book. The study offers much needed reflection on this vital and underappreciated period of Roman history. I predict that it will become the general survey book to introduce the complex politics of the Theodosian age for many university students.