

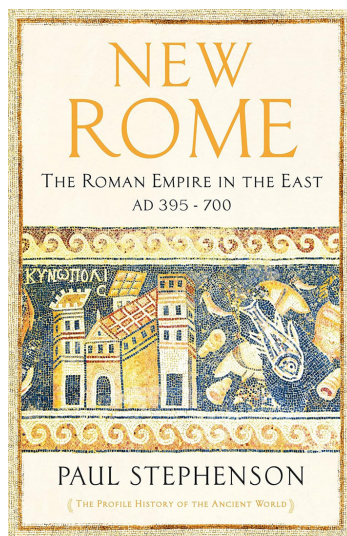
Book Review

New Rome. The Roman Empire in the East. AD 395-700

Stephenson (P.), Pp. 464, London: Profile Books, 2022. Cased, £30. ISBN: 978-1-781-25007-5

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In his latest book, Paul Stephenson has at heart his idea to examine the extended period of time of the existence of the Roman Empire in the East, not limiting himself to Constantinople itself but drawing on many techniques in the recording of history to draw a long-term conclusion through these trends and patterns. These trends and patterns now include more modern archaeological research and the study of climate change during that specific 300-year history of the Empire. It is thus a book rooted as much in historical

chronicle as it is in modern scientific examination. It was an approach that was much favoured by Averil Cameron, former Professor of Late Antique and Byzantine Studies at the University of Oxford, when speaking about researching the same period that Stephenson does in this book. To quote her directly: 'Consideration of this *long duree* is more helpful than the appeal to immediate causal factors.'

Although any reader of this book can argue that what Stephenson is doing is nothing new, I would say that the manner in which his scientific research is brought to the attention of the reader is splendidly new. Especially, the research on climate change through volcanic eruptions, sickness and continued plagues places a stark focus on the effects on the population that had already been confronted by so many man-made catastrophes such as the prolonged civil wars in the 3rd and 4th centuries BCE. Stephenson even goes as far as to provide at the end of each chapter a series of endnotes that contain the references to journal articles from all sorts of scientific sources, not just the normal citation of historical articles that most academics at least are used to. To the general reader this is an invaluable tool to greater understanding of all the changes that the Eastern Empire faced.

In the first two chapters of the book, Stephenson deals with the end of the lead age, the family in Byzantine society, slavery and the widespread economic nature thereof, the land question and the importance of ownership (because fundamentally this would be a question of taxation) and last, but certainly not least, monks and eunuchs. Although not as important as economic questions or the central theme of Byzantine society (namely the family), monks and eunuchs were often at the heart of court life with some being mutilated to an extreme extent - mostly because political intrigue and ambition followed them as it had always done and would continue to do for hundreds of years more. The main source for the introductory chapters was the chronicle of the *Life of St Theodore of Sykeon*, which Stephenson has used to great success, bringing out all the surprising events in glorious detail to paint the picture of power, family and society in Byzantium. This chapter reveals Stephenson's real training as an historian, apart from the wide effects of history that were discussed earlier.

Stephenson then goes on to discuss cities in the next chapter. A lively discussion for lively places, he describes the inheritance of these cities as former city states and the lives of the people that walked the colonnaded streets or the market place. Also, Stephenson discusses cities as the nodes central to governance in a wide and expansive empire. During this chapter we see the emergence of the three great cities: Constantinople, Antioch and Alexandria. These cities would often appear at odds with each other regarding who among them could lay claim to be the greatest city of the empire. The next chapter focuses on the winner of that debate: Constantinople – the 'New Rome', the seat of imperial and even spiritual power. The importance of the position of the clergy had already been established in the previous chapters.

Stephenson's description of Constantinople and the functioning of the city makes for absorbing reading. From the Imperial Palace to the Hippodrome, and the fish markets to the great churches, the sketch can only be described as extremely vivid. Stephenson also goes into great detail on how the city was governed and how it in turn tried to govern all the far-flung provinces. The idea that this city is the 'New Rome', as in the title of the book, is proven in this detailed chapter and the reader is left in no doubt that this place really is the seat of power.

Part two of the book begins with an historical account of three of the most well-known emperors during the period 395–700: Theodosius II, Justinian I, and Herakleios. Each of the three is famous for different reasons: Theodosius, for the creation of Christian Orthodoxy; Justinian, for trying to restore the traditional European boundaries of the Western Empire; and Herakleios, for the fragility and collapse under Arab invasion. Stephenson highlights in this chapter that although through this period the Empire went through an incredible transition, this transition was certainly not in the minds of the citizenry. They clung on to the old idea of the Empire even though that didn't exist anymore. They looked at provinces that had long since been lost as still being part of the Empire - a nostalgic wanting for past glory.

In the final chapters Stephenson discusses the effects of climate change and plague on the Empire. The volcanic eruption of 536 blanketed most of Europe in a cloud, diminishing sunlight and dropping temperatures significantly. The plague that started in 545 is also put into context and, together with persistent earthquakes,

that promotes the theme of an impending apocalypse that seemed to be realised with the Arab conquests after the Persian war. Stephenson also goes into a technical description of what iconoclasm was and ends this massive, detailed work with the sentence 'This was the world we called Byzantium'. A massively bold claim from a

massively bold author who has created in this volume a *tour de force* of the long-duration historical study, a masterful piece of work that future historians should be envious to try to emulate.

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