Propylaeum
recensio.antiquitatis

Citation style

Wijnendaele, Jeroen: Rezension über: Chris Doyle, Honorius. The Fight for the Roman West AD 395–423, London/New York: Routledge, 2018, in: Plekos. Elektronische Zeitschrift für Rezensionen und Berichte zur Erforschung der Spätantike, 21 (2019), S. 503-509, DOI: 10.21245/rec.ant.260745364, heruntergeladen über Website

copyright

This article may be downloaded and/or used within the private copying exemption. Any further use without permission of the rights owner shall be subject to legal licences (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).

Chris Doyle: Honorius: The Fight for the Roman West AD 395–423. London/New York: Routledge 2018 (Roman Imperial Biographies). XX, 205 p., 27 ill., 3 maps. £ 115.00. ISBN 978-1-138-19088-7.

In the days of 19th and early 20th century historiography, it was a given that any king, emperor or commander of some (dis)repute deserved a proper biography. While 'Great Man History' – usually of the male, pale and stale variety – has never really gone away, biographies of individuals who usually ended up as protagonists or antagonists of the Roman elites are hardly as fashionable as in the days of yore. Yet Roman Imperial Biographies have retained a recognisable corner in the study of the empire's political history. When imperial biography is done right, it becomes a window that can open our eyes to the dynamics and trappings of how the imperial system functioned or faltered during one particular period. To cite just two fine examples, one could think of Noel Lenski's *Valens. Failure of Empire* or Aloys Winterling's *Caligula. Eine Biographie*. Readers who hope to find in this review a book of similar stature, are gently advised to divert their gaze and look elsewhere.

Chris Doyle has set himself, as Richard Billows puts in his endorsement, "the unenviable task in reviewing the life and reign of the much-despised emperor Honorius." This much is true and it is hard to come across a more maligned emperor than Honorius.[1] Even *enfants terribles* such as Caligula, Nero, Caracalla or Elagabalus at least possessed a certain flamboyance giving them a wide appeal. Not so Honorius. He became sole *Augustus* of the Roman West in 395, around the tender age of ten. In the three decades that followed his accession, every diocese of his realm (bar Africa) witnessed years of large-scale violence and disruption due to civil wars and incursions by the-peoples-formerly-known-as-the-barbarians. At the end of his reign, Britain was lost, the Danubian provinces turned into a twilight zone with little to no governance, Gaul under restored rule but with new multi-ethnic garrison armies who retained substantial autonomy, and Spain still hosting a large hostile confederacy that remained a thorn in his successor's side. Does it even need to be mentioned that Rome was sacked on his watch in 410?

1 With the exception, perhaps, of Phocas (602–610) whose reign witnessed the first stage of the irreversible shattering of the Roman Empire in the Near East.

As the above synopsis shows, there is certainly no lack of *histoire événementielle* should one desire to produce a study of the emperor. Nevertheless, Honorius had not yet received an imperial biography in the past century or so. The reasons for this lacuna are most likely two-fold: the lack of complete and detailed contemporary historical accounts of his reign, and the fact that we have preciously little information about the emperor himself. This makes it even more surprising that the author is precisely intent on producing a book that "trace[s] Honorius' maturing from childhood to maturity [...]. It examines the life – and by extension the times" (6). A personal biography of Roman Emperors is a truly daunting task, since most of the time we simply do not have the type of ego-documents that could allow us to say meaningful things about their private lives (a few conspicuous exceptions such as Marcus Aurelius or Julian notwithstanding). For Honorius, we possess none such sources.

In this book, the author considers some general characteristics of the fourth century empire (chapter 2), the reign of Theodosius I and Honorius' upbringing (chapters 3–4), the revolt of Gildo (chapter 5), Honorius' marriages (chapter 6), the challenges of Alaric, Radagaisus and Constantine III (chapter 7), Honorius' Christian policies (chapter 8), and the remaining thirteen years of his reign (chapter 9). We quickly come across one of the first positive traits of the book. The author quotes regularly from the primary sources, thus allowing the reader to make up their own mind. A second merit is the inclusion of high-quality photos of numismatic media in black and white.[2] The organisation and interpretation of the material poses many questions, however.

The first red flags are raised in the first chapter ('Opinion and source'). It cobbles together quarter-millennium old judgments on Honorius (such as those of Tillemont and Gibbon), 19th century artistic impressions, and an overview of the sources in a format that makes one wonder whether the book is designed for academic peers or first-year-undergraduates. At the very start of the book, we can read that "this book should interest undergraduates, research students and professional scholars". Yet among modern schol-

2 The reviewer will refrain from borrowing Guy Halsall's quip about a different book that "the problem with this book was that the same could be said of its argument" (review of B. Ward-Perkins: The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilisation. Oxford/New York 2005. In: Early Medieval Europe 16, 2008, 384–386, 386).

arship, we find no discussion (not even citations) of some of the most important studies pertaining to Honorius' life and time: among the casualties we could list Pierre Maraval and Hartmut Leppin on Theodosius I, Santo Mazzarino and Tido Janssen on Stilicho, Werner Lütkenhaus on Constantius III, or even Bruno Bleckmann's seminal article on Honorius.[3] The quasi-exclusive Anglophone bibliography is chopped up in separate lists at the end of each chapter, with only a very slim general bibliography at the back. There are no foot- or endnotes throughout the book; merely sporadic in-text citations where the author primarily lists literature supporting his case. This very format means that there is no meaningful engagement with existing scholarship, making it nigh impossible to qualify the book itself as a piece of scholarship. The sources do not fare better.

Already at the start we read "that there is actually very little criticism of [Honorius] among ancient, contemporary, sources" (7); "the dissenting voices are by and large pagan [Eunapius, Olympiodorus]" (8); "it took nearly a century after Honorius' death for a truly negative literary tradition [Procopius'] about him to emerge" (8). The reader may wish to compare such confident statements with the verdicts of contemporary western Christian sources, who wrote just a generation after Honorius' death:

- "Honorius left an empire severely weakened by many crises." (Gallic Chronicle of 452, *s. a.* 423).
- "My land of Gaul hath even till now been ignored by the lords of the world, and hath languished in slavery unheeded. Since that time [Theodosius' restoration of Valentinian II in 389] much hath been destroyed, for with the emperor, whoe'er he might be [Honorius and Valentinian III], closely confined, it has been the constant lot of the distant parts of a wretched world to be laid waste." (Sidonius Apollinaris, *Panegyric to Majorian*, 356–360).

3 P. Maraval: Théodose le Grand, 379–395. Le pouvoir et la foi. Paris 2009; H. Leppin: Theodosius der Große. Darmstadt 2003 (Gestalten der Antike); S. Mazzarino: Stilicone. La crisi imperiale dopo Teodosio. Rome 1942 (Studi pubblicati dall'Istituto italiano per la Storia Antica 3); T. Janßen: Stilicho. Das weströmische Reich vom Tode des Theodosius bis zur Ermordung Stilichos (395–408). Marburg 2004; W. Lütkenhaus: Constantius III. Studien zu seiner Tätigkeit und Stellung im Westreich 411–421. Bonn 1998 (Habelts Dissertationsdrucke. Reihe Alte Geschichte 44); B. Bleckmann: Honorius und das Ende der römischen Herrschaft in Westeuropa. In: HZ 265, 1997, 561–595.

- "Honorius ruled 32 years [...]. The state suffered many severe wounds during his reign. The most biting was the capture and ruin of the city of Rome by Alaric [...]. Gaul and Spain were ravaged [...] and thoroughly destroyed. The British provinces were forever removed from the Roman name [...]. This same emperor accomplished nothing worthwhile against external enemies [...]." (Narration of the emperors of the house of Valentinian [I] and Theodosius [I])

This is exemplary for an eclectic approach to the sources throughout the narrative, where the author takes statements at face-value (e.g. the allegation that Arbogastes personally murdered courtiers of Valentinian II in the latter's presence [72]), displays marked agnosticism where it is not warranted (e.g. Gildo's transfer of the African provinces from Milan to Constantinople's jurisdiction "may have occurred, or perhaps not" [86])[4], or widely misreads them (e.g. "Stilicho delivered Alaric's bill [to the senate] of 5,000 pounds of gold, 30,000 pounds of silver, and an enormous quantity of spices and silks" [137]. This is rather what Alaric himself extorted from Rome during his first siege, when Stilicho's body had already been separated from its head).

Scholars may also be surprised to see the resurrection of old-fashioned readings of the historical background, even when the bibliography cites recent studies on the issues under consideration. Thus, we repeatedly see the Gothic groups who crossed the Danube in 376 and settled in the Balkans described as 'Visigoths' (40, 44, 62, 79 etc.). Nowadays there is overwhelming consensus, even among scholars otherwise diametrically opposed on all things Gothic, that the Visigoths were a *new* formation who only emerged around Alaric's leadership (395–410) and hailed from various Gothic groups (including descendants of those who crossed the Danube in 376, but also more recent ones such as survivors of Radagaisus' host in 405–406). The author also writes as if previous decades never saw ground-breaking debates on non-Roman ethnicity or the power-balance between the Empire and its neighbours. Hence we come across language such as "the existential danger the barbarians posed to the state" (41), "the Visigothic tide" (86) or, concerning the Rhine Crossing of 406, "the dam had well and truly given away" (134), that is bound to invoke the ire of certain historians. Similarly, in a

4 The Theodosian Code makes it clear that the Praetorian Prefect Theodorus did not have jurisdiction over Africa during those crucial months of 397–398. Even Claudian confesses as much (Gild. 160–164, 191–200, 284–287; Eutrop. 1,410–411; Stil. 1,277–287).

book that tries to exonerate one emperor from tried and trite labels (4–5), the author just as easily slips into that same vernacular when dealing with other individuals (e.g. 'the maniacal Caligula' [7]).

One also wonders about the rationale behind the book's organization. The final chapter, for instance, covers nearly half of Honorius' secular reign in merely fifteen pages. Chapter 5, on the other hand, is the first one where Honorius' reign as emperor comes under consideration. Curiously, however, it focusses not on the installation of his government, the fraught relations with Constantinople because of Stilicho's campaigns against Alaric, but the revolt of the *comes et magister utriusque militiae per Africam* Gildo. While the author is right in pointing out that this was a significant event, and the first true challenge to the new western government, the space dedicated to it seems out of place in a book that wishes to study Honorius. The chapter is also exemplary for not trying to explain the problems the sources present us: i.e. why did Gildo act against the western government in the way he did? His agency is not considered, his "treason" (86) accepted whilst ignoring that Arcadius was senior *Augustus*, and he ultimately appears as a discarded instrument of the eastern chamberlain Eutropius' machinations. Much more could have been said about Gildo's stance vis-à-vis Honorius, if the author had considered Orosius' enigmatic testimony that he was motivated to act the way he did because of the emperor's youth (Oros. 7,36,2–3). Again, in a book that is supposed to centre on Honorius, it is mystifying why there is no integral analysis of the emperor's actions during his deadlock with Alaric in 408–410. Here at least, the Olympiodoran tradition (as preserved in Philostorgius, Photius, Sozomen and Zosimus) gives us probably the best documentation on Honorius' entire reign for him acting as an emperor. Not so in this book.

Meanwhile, the reader stumbles upon erroneous assertions galore. The following list is only a sampling: Ammianus was not visiting Rome in the 390s, but already residing there from the late 380s at the latest (36). Trajan's conquest of Dacia was not "the last significant imperial land-grab", but Septimius Severus' Mesopotamian conquests (39). Vandals and even Lombards (!) are listed as perpetrators of "foreign immigration and invasion" in the fourth century, while none of them appear in the historical record of that time (40). Stilicho was not of "Roman and Germanic heritage", since the Vandals were never labelled 'Germanic' by contemporary sources (only those communities closest to the Rhine) (53). Flaccilla's nephew Nebridus is

described as "an officer in the imperial guard", while Jerome's letter 79 only states that he served in the palace (70). Arbogastes' Frankish recruits are described as *foederati*, while not a single source ever categorized fourth or fifth century Franks as such (74). Gildo is repeatedly labelled as *comes Africae* during Honorius' reign, while he held the superior rank of *magister militum* in the diocese (86, 87, 97). His correct title is listed once, yet bizarrely placed in 383 instead of 393 (90). Stilicho did not campaign against Franks in Raetia at the time of Alaric's first incursion of Italy, but against Vandals and Alans (113, 115). Radagaisus' main army was not defeated at Faesulae, but Florence (132). Marcus Aurelius did not enlist slaves for his wars along the Rhine, but along the Danube (132). The *comes Africae* Heraclianus is repeatedly branded a usurper, while there is no evidence he ever was one (147, 167, 177, 179).

At the end of this book, it is not only the Imperial Roman West that is clinging on to dear life, but whatever academic rigor behind it as well. We encounter no real conclusion, only a brief appraisal (189–190). Doyle's main line of thought – it hardly constitutes a thesis – is that Honorius reigned and survived for three decades and this is a sign that at least he must have done something right. Yet lengths of reigns by themselves are no proper indication of an emperor's acumen. Any student of Late Byzantine History could point out that Ioannes V Palaiologos' half-century reign (1341–1391) inaugurated the terminal decline of Eastern Rome. Another counter-symptom is that during Honorius' reign no less than eight men in four different provinces staged usurpations against the emperor.[5] Besides Gallienus, no western emperor ever experienced this many blatant challenges to his authority. Perhaps more thoughtful consideration of these structural phenomena could have helped to shed welcome new light on Honorius. Instead, we merely sip on old wine in new skins.

It would be a shame to end a review on an utterly negative note, so it should be said that this book at least shows the most sympathetic approach possible to an emperor who for over a millennium-and-a-half has been shunned and scorned. Doyle writes vividly and sprinkles his prose with humour. If there is an audience best served with this book, then it is probably the amateur-historian who has enough money to burn on this hardcover for a fast-paced and amusing read.

5 In Britain: Marcus, Gratian and Constantine [III]. In Italy (and later Gaul): Priscus Attalus. In Gaul: Constans, Jovinus and Sebastian. In Spain: Maximus.

Jeroen W. P. Wijnendaele, Gent
jeroen.wijnendaele@ugent.be

www.plekos.de

Empfohlene Zitierweise
Jeroen W. P. Wijnendaele: Rezension zu: Chris Doyle: Honorius: The Fight for the Roman West AD 395–423. London/New York: Routledge 2018 (Roman Imperial Biographies). In: Plekos 21, 2019, 503–509 (URL: http://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2019/r-doyle.pdf).