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HERACLIUS, SOLID AND LIQUID

James Howard-Johnston: The Last Great War of Antiquity. Oxford/ New York: Oxford University Press 2021. XIX, 446 p., 32 ill., 9 maps. £ 35.00/$ 45.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-883019-1.

Nadine Viermann: Herakleios, der schwitzende Kaiser. Die oströmische Monarchie in der ausgehenden Spätantike. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2021 (Millennium-Studien 89). X, 382 p. € 129.95. ISBN: 978-3-11-071114-1.

It is a great opportunity to review two recent books on the same subject by two authors who could hardly be more different as far as their career stages are concerned: James Howard-Johnston, the Emeritus Fellow of Corpus Christi, Oxford, who has formed generations of Byzantinists (and been prodigal of so much kind advice and good humor to this very reviewer), here signing off from retirement what amounts to the summation of a life's work on things seventh century; and Nadine Viermann, publishing her well received Konstanz dissertation shortly after taking up, hailing from Germany, her first permanent position for Late Antiquity at Durham. The two books, while both covering in essence the first twenty years of Heraclius' reign and being both excellent in more than one way, could also not be more different. This statement will be clarified in what follows, but it substantially boils down to one feature, which one may or may not consider linked to the generational gap that has just been highlighted: Howard-Johnston's book is a masterpiece of positivist historiography, while Viermann's is quite theoretical.

Howard-Johnston's "The Last Great War of Antiquity" narrates, over ten chapters of almost equal length which read like instalments, the development of Byzantine-Persian warfare from the contested reign of Phocas (602–610) and the failure of the 591 peace to Heraclius' final victory at Ctesiphon and celebrations around a quarter of a century later ("Khusro's War of Revenge", pp. 8–36; "The Heraclian Revolution", pp. 37–71; "Persian Breakthrough", pp. 72–102; "Khusro's Fateful Decision", pp. 103–133; "The Middle East in the 620s", pp. 134–190; "Opening of the Battle for Survival", pp. 191–213; "Heraclius' First Counteroffensive", pp. 214–245; "Climax of the War",

pp. 246–292; "Heraclius' Second Counteroffensive", pp. 293–320; "The Difficult Road to Peace", pp. 321–359; "Conclusion", pp. 360–387) . This is done in an energetic, personal, engaging and at times epic literary prose which, despite not always being absolutely terse, is simply a pleasure to read. Thus one reads, at the very beginning of the book, "It was not a war to end all wars" (p. 1), and a little below, on the historian's task, "innocence is the great enemy, closely followed by an excess in suspicion which may result in overingenious interpretation", while "conjecture [...] must be kept at hand" (p. 7). The backbone of the work and arguably the author's greatest concern is the chronology of the events. No occasion to argue with either the primary sources and their 'errors' or with the modern authorities whenever a date seems debatable is left unexploited, with Theophanes, the ninth-century chronicler, and Constantine Zuckerman, the contemporary historian whom Howard-Johnston regards as "a peerless scholar [...] and a formidable antagonist" (p. VII), being recurring targets. A tentative chronological table of such events is offered in the front matter (pp. XVII–XIX). The book is characterized by an uncommon attention to (but also speculation regarding) the least told side of the story, the Persian one. Unsurprisingly for those who are acquainted with him and his work, Howard-Johnston's imaginary is filled with, at times, modernizing (official) "communications", "disinformation", "mobilization" and "propaganda", "public opinion", which may indeed have played some role in seventh-century Byzantium and Persia. These notions all find their place in the index (pp. 435–446), while 'communiqués', discussed at length in the short Appendix 3, on the "Sources" (pp. 403–412), should have. It should be noted that the author had already done the preparatory work of attempting to disentangle the sources for the seventh-century Near East at large in his "Witnesses to a World Crisis".[1] The present book includes two more Appendixes, on the "Dramatis Personae" (1, pp. 395–397), where political entities are meant, and the "Scene" (2, pp. 399–401), or Near Eastern geography, an "Afterword" (pp. 389–393), retracing later Western and Eastern reception of the events narrated in the book, and the usual back matter with the above-mentioned index. The book also contains numerous maps, all drawn anew, and photographs, many of which were taken in Iran by the author himself.

1 J. Howard-Johnston: Witnesses to a World Crisis. Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century. Oxford/New York 2010.

Viermann's "Herakleios, der schwitzende Kaiser" is a sizeable, neatly organized, written and documented volume to be enjoyed in Open Access or as a very expensive hardback. The distinctive title is an allusion to Heraclius' portrayal by the court poet George of Pisidia, on whom more will be said below, and possibly a jab taken at Western medieval theorizations of the king's body. The author's focus is on the emperor and his capital. This relationship, the reader is told, is key to understanding the Late Roman political system as a whole. The book is thus meant to document a shift in *Herrschaftspraxis* supposedly taking place under Heraclius yet consisting in the main, in the author's view, in the emperor's abandoning the capital to perform in person a more military role (in the East in this case), something that the reader is in turn invited to regard as particularly momentous for drawing an ideal line between 'Rome' and 'Byzantium'. Thence, following the introduction (in fact Chapter 1, including a useful presentation of the sources, pp. 1–26), the structure of the work, with Chapters 2 illustrating the Late Antique *status quo* ("Hauptstädtische Monarchie und militärischer Sektor", pp. 27–77), Chapters 3–4 describing change and its perceived reasons since the sixth century ("Dynamiken gewaltsamer Machtwechsel", pp. 78–137; "Remilitarisierung des Kaisertums", pp. 138–185), Chapter 5 how change was overcome, mainly through the insistent agency of the above-mentioned verse panegyrist, George of Pisidia, who presented Heraclius as both a saint and a soldier, a savior and a king ("Der schwitzende Kaiser", pp. 186–251), and the first part of Chapter 6 dealing with the reintegration of the emperor in the traditional metropolitan context, upon his return, that is, from campaigning. Viermann truly is at her best when translating George. She calls out the present reviewer and Mary Whitby for not finalizing our own respective translations (p. 186, n. 1) but neither Mary nor I have in fact ever publicly announced the forthcoming publication of our Pisidian diversions. The second part of Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 are little more than a coda sketching swiftly the emperor's last decade and the reigns of his successors ("Zwischen Triumph und Katastrophe", pp. 252–316; "Herakleios' Nachfolge", pp. 317–332). The core of the author's argument is the contention that Heraclius 'remilitarized' the imperial office to strike a deal with what she calls *militärischer Sektor* while securing through dynastic arrangements a presence in the capital; admittedly, this is not a new interpretation in any of its inflections. It is unclear, however, how George, residing and composing his poems in the capital for a metropolitan audience, could have mediated such a deal, while the evidence of coins as presented (with important lacunas) by

the author (p. 167) and showing Heraclius in military dress on the ubiquitous small copper change only after most of his labors were accomplished and, even then, only briefly, poses an unsolvable dilemma. Little is said about Heraclius' soldiers, who take center stage in the author's analysis.

The two books do have something in common. For one thing, both authors play with the idea that this is the end of Antiquity. Howard-Johnston's reader is reminded of that on every second page by the very title of the book as repeated in the upper left margin, but the author himself does not stop to explain or ask why it should be so. By contrast, joining the historiographical debate on the turning point from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, from 'Rome' to 'Byzantium', seems to be Viermann's ultimate concern, with her main interlocutor being Mischa Meier. Indeed, Byzantine rulers will more than occasionally campaign in person after Heraclius, as they had done until Theodosius I. "The heart of kings", the saying goes, "is unsearchable" (Prov 25.3). But whether, in spite of old wisdom, the study of monarchy (and empires, for that matter) really will take us forward in the search for turning points, it is rather the fifth-century sedentary emperor that will appear odd – and Heraclius correspondingly less exciting – once we look at the Byzantines the way they looked at themselves, that is, as 'Romans' and acknowledge, accordingly, that campaigning in person is basically what a 'Roman' emperor did. Speaking of kingship, a clear merit the two books share is to downplay, Howard-Johnston implicitly by avoiding, restrainedly, the subject, and Viermann explicitly by pointing out the variety of Heraclius' religiously informed models around 630 (pp. 242–251), the supposedly Messianic motives encountered in current mainstream readings of Heraclius' reign with special reference to the restitution of the cross. The two books also share, however, in the same connection, an insufficient discussion of the date and significance of the adoption of the Greek title *basileus*, which Howard-Johnston rightly calls "modest" (p. 362) but which both he and Viermann (p. 234) date, traditionally, to 629 despite referring to the very work that has proven that date to be wrong.[2]

If the simultaneous reading of these two books tells us anything at all about the state and direction of the field, it is that the art of *Quellenforschung* and the historiography of events should not and will not retire with Howard-

2 C. Zuckerman: On the Titles and Offices of the Byzantine βασιλεύς. In: T&MByz 16, 2010, pp. 865–890.

Johnston. On their results, which are not untypically obtained through decades of incessant work, is after all based any attempt at bringing out the 'big picture', or pieces thereof, as Viermann has done exemplarily. Here are two states of the same matter we call historiography: the first is solid, like a chronology printed once and for all in the preliminaries, with all its errors; the second is liquid, like every debate in which the question itself is arguable, born in movement and destined to keep on moving in turns and whirls. Both states are perhaps necessary and desirable, lest history itself turn into thin air instead.

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